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The Master Mummer

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

Mrs. Dean Starks
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The Master Mummer

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"Let the boy have his chance," said Allan.

Frontispiece. *The Master Mummer.*

The Master Mummer

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Author of "Anna, the Adventuress," "A Prince of Sinners," "The Betrayal," Etc.

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS

A. L. BURT COMPANY

Publishers *New York*

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THE NOVELS OF
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

- A Prince of Sinners
- Anna the Adventuress
- The Master Mummer
- A Maker of History
- Mysterious Mr. Sabin
- The Yellow Crayon
- The Betrayal
- The Traitors
- Enoch Strone
- A Sleeping Memory
- The Malefactor
- A Daughter of the Marionis
- The Mystery of Mr. Bernard Brown
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- A Millionaire of Yesterday
- The Long Arm of Mannister
- Jeanne of the Marshes
- The Illustrious Prince
- The Lost Ambassador
- Berenice
- The Moving Finger

Book I

U.B. [illegible] JUN 12 1941

The Master Mummer

CHAPTER I

SHEETS of virgin manuscript paper littered my desk, the smoke of much uselessly consumed tobacco hung about the room in a little cloud. Many a time I had dipped my pen in the ink, only to find myself a few minutes later scrawling ridiculous little figures upon the margin of my blotting-pad. It was not at all an auspicious start for one who sought immortality.

There came a growl presently from the other side of the room, where Mabane, attired in a disreputable smock, with a short black pipe in the corner of his mouth, was industriously defacing a small canvas. Mabane was tall and fair and lean, with a mass of refractory hair which was the despair of his barber; a Scotchman with keen blue eyes, and humorous mouth amply redeeming his face from the plainness which would otherwise have been its lot. He also was in search of immortality.

"Make a start for Heaven's sake, Arnold," he implored. "To look at you is an incitement to laziness. The world's full of things to write about. Make a choice and have done with it. Write something, even if you have to tear it up afterwards."

I turned round in my chair and regarded Mabane reproachfully.

"Get on with your pot-boiler, and leave me alone, Allan," I said. "You do not understand my difficulties in the least. It is simply a matter of selection. My brain is full of ideas — brimming over. I want to be sure that I am choosing the best."

There came to me from across the room a grunt of contempt.

"Pot-boiler indeed! What about short stories at ten guineas a time, must begin in the middle, scented and padded to order, Anthony Hopeish, with the sugar of Austin Dobson and the pepper of Kipling shaken on *ad lib.*? Man alive, do you know what pot-boilers are? It 's a perfect conservatory you 're living in. Got any tobacco, Arnold?"

I jerked my pouch across the room, and it was caught with a deft little backward swing of the hand. Allan Mabane was an M.C.C. man, and a favourite point with his captain.

"You 've got me on the hip, Allan," I answered, rising suddenly from my chair and walking restlessly up and down the large bare room. "The devil himself might have put those words into your mouth. They are pot-boilers, every one of them, and I am sick of it. I want to do something altogether different. I am sure that I can, but I have got into the way of writing those other things, and I can't get out of it. That is why I am sitting here like an owl."

Mabane refilled his pipe and smoked contentedly.

"I know exactly how you 're feeling, old chap," he said sympathetically. "I get a dash of the same thing sometimes — generally in the springtime. It begins with a sort of wistfulness, a sense of expansion follows, you go about all the time with your head in

the clouds. You want to collect all the beautiful things in life and express them. Oh, I know all about it. It generally means a girl. Where were you last night?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Where I shall be to-night, to-morrow night — where I was a year ago. That is the trouble of it all. One is always in the same place."

He shook his head.

"It is a very bad attack," he said. "Your generalities may be all right, but they are not convincing."

"I have not spoken a word to a woman, except to Mrs. Burdett, for a week or more," I declared.

Mabane resumed his work. Such a discussion, his gesture seemed to indicate, was not worth continuing. But I continued, following out my train of thought, though I spoke as much to myself as to my friend.

"You are right about my stories," I admitted. "I have painted rose-coloured pictures of an imaginary life, and publishers have bought them, and the public, I suppose, have read them. I have dressed up puppets of wood and stone, and set them moving like mechanical dolls — over-gilded, artificial, vulgar. And all the time the real thing knocks at our doors."

Mabane stepped back from his canvas to examine critically the effect of an unexpected dash of colour.

"The public, my dear Greatson," he said abstractedly, "do not want the real thing — from you. Every man to his *mêtier*. Yours is to sing of blue skies and west winds, of hay-scented meadows and Watteau-like revellers in a paradise as artificial as a Dutch garden. Take my advice, and keep your muse chained. The other worlds are for the other writers."

I was annoyed with Mabane. There was just sufficient truth in his words to make them sound brutal. I answered him with some heat.

"Not if I starve for it, Allan? The whole cycle of life goes humming around us, hour by hour. It is here, there, everywhere. I will bring a little of it into my work, or I will write no more."

Mabane shook his head. He was busy again upon his canvas.

"It is always the humourist," he murmured, "who is ambitious to write a tragedy — and *vice versâ*. The only sane man is he who is conscious of his limitations."

"On the contrary," I answered quickly, "the man who admits them is a fool. I have made up my mind. I will dress no more dolls in fine clothes, and set them strutting across a rose-garlanded stage. I will create, or I will leave alone. I will write of men and women, or not at all."

"It will affect your income," Mabane said. "It will cost you money in postage stamps, and your manuscripts will be declined with thanks."

His gentle cynicism left me unmoved. I had almost forgotten his presence. I was standing over by the window, looking out across a wilderness of housetops. My own thoughts for the moment were sufficient. I spoke, it is true, but I spoke to myself.

"A beginning," I murmured. "That is all one wants. It seems so hard, and yet — it ought to be so easy. If one could but lift the roofs — could but see for a moment underneath."

"I can save you the trouble," Mabane remarked cheerfully, strolling over to my side. "Where are

you looking? Chertsey Street, eh? Well, in all probability mamma is cooking the dinner, Mary is scrubbing the floor, Miss Flora is dusting the drawing-room, and Miss Louisa is practising her scales. You have got a maggot in your brain, Greatson. Life such as you are thinking of is the most commonplace thing in the world. The middle-classes have n't the capacity for passion — even the tragedy of existence never troubles them. Don't try to stir up the muddy waters, Arnold. Write a pretty story about a Princess and her lovers, and draw your cheque."

"There are times, Allan," I remarked thoughtfully, "when you are an intolerable nuisance."

Mabane shrugged his shoulders and returned to his work. Apparently he had reached a point in it which required his undivided attention, for he relapsed almost at once into silence. Following his example, I too returned to my desk and took up my pen. As a rule my work came to me easily. Even now there were shadowy ideas, well within my mental grasp — ideas, however, which I was in the humour to repel rather than to invite. For I knew very well whither they would lead me — back to the creation of those lighter and more fanciful figures flitting always across the canvas of a painted world. A certain facility for this sort of thing had brought me a reputation which I was already growing to hate. More than ever I was determined not to yield. Mabane's words had come to me with a subtle note of mockery underlying their undoubted common-sense. I thrust the memory of them on one side. Certain gifts I knew that I possessed. I had a ready pen and a facile invention. Something had stirred in me a

late-awakened but irresistible desire to apply them to a different purpose than ever before. As I sat there the creations of my fancy flitted before me one by one — delicate, perhaps, and graceful, thoughtfully conceived, adequately completed. Yet I knew very well that they were like ripples upon the water, creatures without lasting forms or shape, images passing as easily as they had come into the mists of oblivion. The human touch, the transforming fire of life was wholly wanting. These April creations of my brain — carnival figures, laughing and weeping with equal facility, lacked always and altogether the blood and muscle of human creatures. The mishaps of their lives struck never a tragic note; always the thrill and stir of actual existence were wanting. I would have no more of them. I felt myself capable of other things. I would wait until other things came.

The door was pushed open, and Arthur smiled in upon us. This third member of our bachelor household was younger than either Mabane or myself — a smooth-faced, handsome boy, resplendent to-day in frock-coat and silk hat.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "Hard at work, both of you!"

Mabane laid down his brush and surveyed the newcomer critically.

"Arthur," he declared with slow emphasis, "you do us credit — you do indeed. I hope that you will show yourself to our worthy landlady, and that you will linger upon the doorstep as long as possible. This sort of thing is good for our waning credit. I am no judge, for I never possessed such a garment, but there is something about the skirts of your frock-

coat which appeals to me. There is indeed, Arthur. And then your tie — the cunning arrangement of it ——"

"Oh, rats!" the boy exclaimed, laughing. "Give me a couple of cigarettes, there's a good chap, and do we feed at home to-night?"

Mabane produced the cigarettes and turned back to his work.

"We do!" he admitted with a sigh. "Always on Tuesdays, you know. By-the-bye, are you going to the works in that costume?"

"Not likely! It's my day at the depôt, worse luck," Arthur answered, pausing to strike a match. "What's up with Arnold?"

"Got the blues, because his muse won't work," Mabane said. "He wants to strike out in a new line — something blood-curdling, you know — Tolstoi-like, or Hall Caineish — he does n't care which. He wants to do what nobody else ever will — take himself seriously. I put it down in charity to dyspepsia."

"Mabane is an ass!" I grunted. "Be off, Arthur, there's a good chap, and don't listen to him. He has n't the least idea what he is talking about."

Arthur, however, happened to be in no hurry. He tilted his hat on the back of his head, and leaned upon the table.

"I have always noticed," he remarked affably, "that under Allan's most asinine speeches there usually lurks a substratum of truth. Are you really going to write a serious novel, Arnold?"

I lit a cigarette and leaned back in my chair resignedly. Arthur was a most impenetrable person, and

if he meant to stay, I knew very well that it was hopeless to attempt to hurry him.

"I had some idea of it," I admitted. "By-the-bye, Arthur, you are a person with a deep insight into life. Can't you give me a few hints? I haven't even made a start."

Arthur considered the matter in all seriousness.

"It is a bit difficult for you, I daresay," he remarked. "You stop indoors so much, and when you do go out you mope off into the country by yourself. You want to knock about the restaurants and places to get ideas. That's what Gorman always does. You see you get all your characters from life in them, and they seem so much more natural."

"And who," I asked, "is Mr. Gorman? I do not recognize the name."

"Pal of mine," Arthur answered easily. "I don't bring him here because he's a bit loud for you chaps. Writes stories for no end of papers. *Illustrated Bits* and the *Cigarette Journal* print anything he cares to send. I thought perhaps you'd know the name."

Mabane went off into a peal of laughter behind his canvas. The boy remained imperturbable.

"Of course, I'm not comparing his work with Arnold's," he declared. "Arnold's stuff is no end better, of course. But, after all, the chap's got common-sense. If they want me to draw a motor I go and sit down in front of it. If Arnold wants to write of real things, real men and women, you know, he ought to go out and look for them. If he sits here and just imagines them, how can he be sure that they are the real thing? See what I mean?"

There was a short silence. Arthur was swinging

his long legs backwards and forwards, and whistling softly to himself. I looked at him for a moment curiously. The words of an ancient proverb flitted through my brain.

"Arthur," I declared solemnly, laying down my pen, "you are a prophet in disguise, the prophet sent to lift the curtain which is before my eyes. Which way shall I go to find these real men and real women, to look upon these tragic happenings? For Heaven's sake direct me. Where, for instance, does Mr. Gorman go?"

Arthur swung himself off, laughing.

"Gorman goes everywhere," he answered. "If I were you I should try one of the big railway stations. So long!"

I rose to my feet, and taking down my hat commenced to brush it. Mabane looked up from his work.

"Where are you off to, Arnold?" he asked.

Some curious instinct or power of divination might indeed have given me a passing glimpse of the things which lay beyond, through the portals of that day, for I answered him seriously enough — even gravely.

"The prophet has spoken," I said. "I must obey! I shall start with Charing Cross."

CHAPTER II

WHY the man should have spoken to me at all I could not tell. Yet it is certain that I heard his simple and courteous inquiry with a thrill of pleasure, not unmixed with excitement. From the first moment of my arrival upon the platform I had singled him out, the only interesting figure in a crowd of nonentities. Perhaps I had lingered a little too closely by his side, had manifested more curiosity in him than was altogether seemly. At any rate, he spoke to me.

"Do you know if the Continental train is punctual?" he asked.

"I have no idea," I answered. "This guard would tell us, perhaps."

"Signalled in, sir," the man declared. "Two minutes late only."

My new acquaintance thanked me and lit a cigarette. He seemed in no hurry to depart, and I was equally anxious to engage him in conversation. For although he was dressed with the trim and quiet precision of the foreigner or man of affairs, there was something about his beardless face, his broadly humorous mouth, and easy, nonchalant bearing which suggested the person who juggled always with the ball of life.

"Marvellous!" he murmured, looking after the guard. "Two minutes late from Paris — and per-

haps beyond. It is a wonderful service. Now, if I had come to meet any one, and had a pressing appointment immediately afterwards, this train would have been an hour late. As it is — ah, well, one is foolish to grumble," he added, with a little shrug of the shoulders.

"You, like me, then," I remarked, "are a loiterer."

He flashed a keen glance upon me.

"I see that I have met," he said slowly, "with someone of similar tastes to my own. I will confess at once that you are right. For myself I feel that there is nothing more interesting in this great city of yours than to watch the people coming and going from it. All your railway stations fascinate me, especially those which are the connecting links with other countries. Perhaps it is because I am an idle man, and must needs find amusement somewhere."

"Yet," I objected, "for a single face or personality which is suggestive, one sees a thousand of the type which only irritates — the great rank and file of the commonplace. I wonder, after all, whether the game is worth the candle."

"One in a thousand," he repeated thoughtfully. "Yet think what that one may mean — a walking drama, a tragedy, a comedy, an epitome of life or death. There is more to be read in the face of that one than in the three hundred pages of the novel over which we yawn ourselves to sleep. Here is the train! Now let us watch the people together — that is, if you really mean that you have no friends to look out for."

"I really mean it," I assured him. "I am here out of the idlest curiosity. I am by profession a scribbler, and I am in search of an idea."

Once more he regarded me curiously.

"Your name is Greatson, is it not — Arnold Greatson? You were pointed out to me once at the Vagabonds' Club, and I never forget a face. Here they come! Look! Look!"

The train had come to a standstill. People were streaming out upon the platform. My companion laid his fingers upon my arm. He talked rapidly but lightly.

"You see them, my young friend," he exclaimed. "Those are returning tourists from Switzerland; the thin, sharp-featured girl there, with a plaid skirt and a satchel, is an American. Heavens! how she talks! She has lost a trunk. The whole system will be turned upside down until she has found it or been compensated. The two young men with her are silent. They are wise. Alone she will prevail. You see the man of commerce; he is off already. He has been to France, perhaps to Belgium also, to buy silks and laces. And the stout old gentleman? See how happy he looks to be back again where English is spoken, and he can pay his way in half-crowns and shillings. You see the milliner's head-woman, dressed with obtrusive smartness, though everything seems a little awry. She has been over to Paris for the fashions; in a few days her firm will send out a little circular, and Hampstead or Balham will be much impressed. And — what do you make of those two, my young friend?"

It seemed to me that my companion's tone was

changed, that his whole appearance was different. I was suddenly conscious of an irresistible conviction. I did not believe any longer that he was, like me, an idle loiterer here. I felt that his presence had a purpose, and that it was connected in some measure with the two people to whom my attention was so suddenly drawn. They were, in that somewhat heterogeneous crowd, sufficiently noticeable. The man, although he assumed the jauntiness of youth, was past middle-age, and his mottled cheeks, his thin, watery eyes, and thick red neck were the unmistakeable hall-marks of years of self-indulgence. He was well dressed and groomed, and his demeanour towards his companion was one of deferential good humour. She, however, was a person of a very different order. She was a girl apparently between fifteen and sixteen, her figure as yet undeveloped, her dresses a little too short. Her face was small and white, her mouth had a most pathetic droop, and in her eyes — wonderful, deep blue eyes — there was a curious look of shrinking fear, beneath which flashed every now and then a gleam of positive terror. Her dark hair was arranged in a thick straight fringe upon her forehead, and in a long plait behind, after the schoolgirl fashion. Notwithstanding the *gaucherie* of her years and her apparent unhappiness, she carried herself with a certain dignity and grace of movement which were wonderfully impressive. I watched her admiringly.

"They are rather a puzzle," I admitted. "I suppose they might very well be father and daughter. It is certain that she is fresh from some convent boarding-school. I don't like the way she looks at the

man, do you? It is as though she were terrified to death. I wonder if he is her father?"

My companion did not answer me. He was straining forward as though anxious to hear the instructions which the man was giving to a porter about the luggage; my presence seemed to be a thing which he had wholly forgotten. The girl stood for a moment alone. More than ever one seemed to perceive in her eyes the nameless fear of the hunted animal. She looked around her furtively, yet with a strange, half-veiled wildness in her dilated eyes. I should scarcely have been surprised to have seen her make a sudden dash for freedom. Presently, however, the man, having identified all his luggage, turned towards her.

"That 's all right," he declared cheerfully. "Now I think that I shall take you straight away for lunch somewhere, and then we must go to the shops. Are you hungry, Isobel?"

"I — I do not know," she answered, so tremulously that the words scarcely reached us, though we were standing only a few feet away.

"We will soon find out," he said. "Hansom, there! Café Grand!"

The cab drove off, and I realized then how completely for the last few moments I had forgotten my companion. I turned to look for him, and found him standing close to my side. He was apparently absorbed in thought, and seemed to have lost all interest in our surroundings. His hands were thrust deep in his overcoat pockets, and his eyes were fixed upon the ground. The stream of people from the train had melted away now, and we were almost alone upon the platform. I hesitated for a moment, and

then walked slowly off. I did not wish to seem discourteous to the man with whom I had exchanged a few remarks more intimate than those which usually pass between strangers, but he had distinctly the air of one wishing to be alone, and I was unwilling to seem intrusive. I had barely taken a dozen steps, however, before I was overtaken. My companion of a few minutes before was again by my side. All traces of his recent preoccupation seemed to have vanished. He was smoking a fresh cigarette, and his bright, deep-set eyes were lit with gentle mirth.

"Well, Mr. Novelist," he exclaimed, "have you succeeded? Is your languid muse stirred? Have you seen a face, a look, a gesture — anything to prick your imagination?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I have seen one thing," I answered, "which it is not easy to forget. I have seen fear, and very pathetic it was."

"You mean ——?"

"In the face of that child, or rather girl, with that coarse-looking brute of a man."

The light seemed to die out from my companion's face. Once more he became stern and thoughtful.

"Yes," he agreed; "I too saw that. If one were looking for tragedy, one might perhaps find it there."

We stood now together on the pavement outside the station. My companion glanced at his watch.

"Come," he said; "I have a fancy that you and I might exchange a few ideas. I am a lonely man, and to-day I am not in the humour for solitude. Do me the favour to lunch with me!"

I did not hesitate for a moment. It was exactly the sort of invitation which I had coveted.

"I shall be delighted," I answered.

"I myself," my companion continued, "have no gift for writing. My talents, such as they are, lie in a different direction. But I have been in many countries, and adventures have come to me of various sorts. I may be able even to start you on your way — if, indeed, the author of *The Lost Princess* is ever short of an idea."

I smiled.

"I can assure you," I said, "that my pilgrimage this morning has no other object than to find one. I begin to fear that I have written too much lately. At any rate, the well of my inspiration, if I may use so grandiloquent a term, has run dry."

He put up his stick and hailed a hansom.

"After all," he said, "it is possible — yes, it is possible that you may succeed. Adventures wait for us everywhere, if only we go about in a proper frame of mind. We will lunch, I think, at the Café Grand."

I followed my prospective host into the cab. Was it altogether a coincidence, I wondered, that we were bound for the same restaurant whither the man and the girl had preceded us a few minutes before?

CHAPTER III

MR. GROOTEN, as my new acquaintance called himself, belied neither his appearance nor his modest reference to himself. He proved at once that he knew how to order a satisfactory luncheon, going through the *menu* with the quiet deliberation of a connoisseur, neither seeking nor accepting any advice from the dark-visaged waiter who stood by his side, and finally writing out his few carefully chosen dishes with a special postscript as to the coffee, which, by-the-bye, we were never to taste. He then leaned over the table and began to talk.

Apparently my host had been in every country of the world, and mixed with people of note in each. His anecdotes were always pungent, personal without being egotistical, and savoured always with a certain dry and perfectly natural humour. I found myself both interested and fascinated by his constant flow of reminiscences, and yet at times my attention wandered. For within a few yards of us were seated the man and the child.

Everything that was noticeable in their demeanour towards one another at the station was even more apparent here. A bottle of champagne stood upon the table. The man had ordered such a luncheon that the head-waiter was seldom far from his side, and the manager in person had come to pay his respects. He himself was apparently doing full justice

to it. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes moist, and his little bursts of laughter as he persevered in his attentions to his companion grew louder and more frequent. But opposite to him, the child's face was unchanged. Her glass was full of wine, but she seemed never to touch it. Her long white fingers played with her bread, but she seemed to eat little or nothing. Her face was pallid and drawn; there was terror — absolute, undiluted terror — in her unnaturally large eyes. Often when the man spoke to her she shivered. Her eyes seemed constantly trying to escape his gaze, wandering round the room, the terror of a hunted animal in their soft, luminous depths. Once they rested upon mine — I was seated in the corner facing her — and it seemed to me that there was appeal — desperate, frenzied appeal — in that long, tense look which thrilled all my pulses with passionate sympathy. Yet she held herself all the while stiff and erect. There was a certain sustaining pride in her close, firm-set mouth. There was never any sign of tears, though more than once her lips parted for a moment in a pitiful quiver.

The table at which we were sitting was just inside the door, in the left-hand corner. The man and the girl were upon the opposite side, and a few yards further in the room. My host, with his face to the door, could see neither of them, therefore, without turning round, and owing to our table being pushed far into the corner, only his back was visible to the people in the restaurant. I, sitting facing him, had an excellent view of the girl and her companion, and I was all the while a witness of the silent drama being played out between the two. There came a

time when I felt that I could stand it no longer. I leaned over our small table, and interrupted my companion in the middle of a story.

"Forgive me," I said, "but I wish you could see that child's face. There is something wrong, I am sure. She is terrified to death. Look, that brute is trying to force her to drink her wine. I really can't sit and watch it any longer."

The man who was my host, and who had called himself Mr. Grooten, nodded his head slightly. I knew at once, however, that he was in close sympathy with me.

"I have been watching them," he said. "There is a mirror over your head; I have seen everything. It is a hideous-looking affair, but what can one do?"

"I know what I am going to do, at any rate," I said, laying my serviette deliberately upon the table. "I don't care what happens, but I am going to speak to the child."

Mr. Grooten raised his eyebrows. Beyond this faint expression of surprise his face betrayed neither approval nor disapproval.

"What will you gain?" he asked.

"Probably nothing," I answered. "And yet I shall try all the same. I dare not go away with the memory of that child's face haunting me. I must make an effort, even though it seems ridiculous. I can't help it."

My companion smiled softly.

"As you will, my impetuous young friend," he said. "This promises to be interesting. I will await your return."

I did not hesitate any longer. I rose to my feet, and crossed the space which lay between the two tables. As I drew nearer to her I watched the child's face. At first a flash of desperate hope seemed suddenly to illumine it; then a fear more abject even than before took its place as she glanced at her companion. She watched me come, reading without a doubt the purpose in my mind with a sort of fascinated wonder. Her eyes were still fastened upon mine when at last I paused before her. I leaned over the table, keeping my shoulder turned upon the man.

"You will forgive me," I said to her in a low tone, "but I believe that you are in trouble. Can I help you? Don't be afraid to tell me if I can."

"You — you are very kind, sir," she began, breathlessly; "I ——"

Her companion intervened. Astonishment and anger combined to render his voice unsteady.

"Eh? What's this? Who the devil are you, sir, and what do you mean by speaking to my ward?"

I disregarded his interruption altogether. I still addressed myself only to the child, and I spoke as encouragingly as I could.

"Don't be afraid to tell me," I said. "Think that I am your brother. I want to help you if I can."

"Oh, if you only could!" she moaned.

Her companion seized me by the arm and forced me to turn round. His face was red almost to suffocation, and two thick blue veins stood out upon his forehead in ugly fashion. His voice was scarcely articulate by reason of his attempt to keep it low.

"Of all the infernal impertinence! What do you mean by it, sir? Who are you? How dare you force yourself upon strangers in this fashion?"

"I am quite aware that I am doing an unusual thing," I answered, "and I perhaps deserve all that you can say to me. At the same time, I am here to have my question answered. You have a child with you who is apparently terrified to death. I insist upon hearing from her own lips whether she is in need of friends."

White and mute, she looked from one to the other. It was the man who answered.

"If this were not a public place," he said, still struggling with his anger, "I 'd punish you as you deserve, you impudent young cub. This young lady is my ward, and I have just brought her from a convent, where she has lived since she was three years old. She is strange and shy, of course, and I was perhaps wrong to bring her to a public place. I did it, however, out of kindness. I wanted her to enjoy herself, but I perhaps did not appreciate her sensitiveness and the fact that only a few days ago she parted with the friends with whom she has lived all her life. Now, sir," he added, with a sneer upon his coarse lips, "I have been compelled to answer your questions to avoid a disturbance in a public place; but I promise you that if you do not make yourself scarce in thirty seconds I will send for the manager."

I looked once more at the child, from whose white, set face every gleam of hope seemed to have fled.

"I can do nothing for you, then?" I asked.

Her eyes met mine helplessly. She shook her head. She did not speak at all.

"Is it true — what he has told me?" I asked.

She murmured an assent so faint, that though I was bending over her, it scarcely did more than reach my ears. I could do no more. I turned away and resumed my seat. Grooten smiled at me.

"Well, Sir Knight Errant," he said lightly; "so you could not free the maiden?"

"I was made to feel and look like a fool, of course," I answered, "but I don't mind about that. To tell you the truth, I am not satisfied now. The man says that he is her guardian, and that he has just brought her from a convent, where she has lived all her life. He vouchsafed to explain things to me to avoid a row, but he was desperately angry. She has never been out of the convent since she was three years old, and she is very nervous and shy. That was his story, and he told it plausibly enough. I could not get anything out of her, except an admission that what he said was the truth."

Mr. Grooten nodded thoughtfully.

"After all," he said, "she is only a child, fourteen or fifteen at the most, I should suppose. I have paid the bill, and, as you see, I have my coat on. Are you ready?"

"Directly I have finished my coffee," I answered. "It looks too good to leave."

"Finish it, by all means," he answered. "I am in no particular hurry. By-the-bye, I forget whether I showed you this."

He drew a small shining weapon, with rather a long barrel, from his pocket, but though he invited me to inspect it, he retained it in his own hand.

"I bought it in New York a few months ago," he

remarked; "it is the latest weapon of destruction invented."

"Is it a revolver?" I asked, a little puzzled by its shape.

"Not exactly," he answered, fingering it carelessly; "it is in reality a sort of air-gun, with a wonderful compression, and a most ingenious silencer; quite as deadly, they say, as any firearm ever invented. It ejects a cylindrically-shaped bullet, tapered down almost to the fineness of a needle. Now," he added, with a faint smile and a rapid glance round the room, "if only one dared —" he turned in his chair, and I saw the thing steal out below his cuff, "one could free the child quite easily — quite easily."

It was all over in a moment — a wonderful, tense moment, during which I sat frozen to my chair, stricken dumb and motionless with the tragedy which it seemed that I alone had witnessed. For there had been a little puff of sound, so slight that no other ears had noticed it. The seat in front of me was empty, and the man on my right had fallen forwards, his hand pressed to his side, his face curiously livid, patchy with streaks of dark colour, his eyes bulbous. Waiters still hurried to and fro, the hum of conversation was uninterrupted. And then suddenly it came — a cry of breathless horror, of mortal unexpected agony — a cry, it seemed, of death. The waiters stopped in their places to gaze breathlessly at the spot from which the cry had come, a silver dish fell clattering from the fingers of one, and its contents rolled unnoticed about the floor. The murmur of voices, the rise and fall of laughter and speech, ceased as though an unseen finger had been pressed

upon the lips of everyone in the room. Men rose in their places, women craned their necks. For a second or two the whole place was like a tableau of arrested motion. Then there was a rush towards the table across which the man had fallen, a doubled-up heap. A few feet away, with only that narrow margin of table-cloth between them, the girl sat and stared at him, still white and panic-stricken, yet with a curious change in her face from which all the dumb terror which had first attracted my attention seemed to have passed away.

CHAPTER IV

THE manager, who was very flurried, closed the door of the little room into which the wounded man had been carried.

"Can you tell me his name, or shall we look for his card-case?" he asked.

I glanced towards the child. She was by far the most composed of the three. Only she remained with her back turned steadily upon the sofa.

"His name is Delahaye," she said; "Major Sir William Delahaye, I think they called him."

"And where does he live — in London? Tell me his address. I will send a cab there at once!"

"I do not know his address," the child answered. "I do not know where he lives."

The manager stared at her.

"You were with him, were you not?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then surely you must know something more about him than just his name?"

"He called himself my guardian. I believe that when I was very young he took me to the convent where I have been ever since. Two days ago he came to fetch me away."

"What is your name?"

"Isobel de Sorrens!"

"You are not related to him, then?"

She shuddered a little.

"I hope not," she said simply.

"Well, where was he taking you to?" the manager asked impatiently. "Surely there must be someone I can send to."

"I believe that he has a house in London," the child said. "I really do not know anything more. You could send to Madame Richard at the Convent St. Argueil. I suppose she knows all about him. She told me that I was to consider him my guardian."

The manager turned to me. I was an occasional customer, and he knew who I was.

"Can you tell me anything about him, Mr. Greatson? The doctor will be here in a moment, but I feel that I ought to be sending for some of his friends. I am afraid that he is very ill."

"You were not in the room at the time it happened?" I remarked.

The manager shook his head.

"No, I was in the office."

"Have you sent for the police?" I asked.

"Police, no!" he exclaimed. "What have the police to do with it? It was an ordinary fit, surely."

I felt that I had held my peace long enough.

"It was not a fit at all," I said gravely. "He was shot with a sort of air-gun by a man sitting at my table. I think that you ought to send for the police at once. The man's name was Grooten, but I know nothing else about him."

The manager was for a moment speechless. The child looked at me eagerly.

"It was the little old gentleman who was sitting

with you who did it," she exclaimed. "I saw him at Charing Cross."

"Yes, it was he!" I answered.

The child turned away.

"Perhaps after all, then," she murmured to herself, "I may have friends in the world."

The manager, whose name was Huber, was inclined to be incredulous.

"An air-gun would have made as much noise as a revolver," he said. "Are you sure of what you say, Mr. Greatson?"

"There is no doubt at all about it," I answered, "and you ought to inform the police at once. This man — Grooten, he called himself — pulled the pistol out of his pocket, and was pretending to show it to me when he fired the shot. He told me that it was a new invention which he had bought in America, and which was quite noiseless."

The manager hurried from the room. The child and I were alone, except for the man on the couch. Every now and then he groaned — a sound I could not hear without a shiver. The child, however, was unmoved. She fixed her dark eyes on me.

"Do you think that he will get away?" she asked eagerly.

"You mean the man who shot Major Delahaye?"

"Yes."

"I think that it is very likely. He has a good start, and I expect that he had made his arrangements."

"I hope he does," she murmured passionately. "I wish that I could help him."

"You have no idea who he was?" I asked. "I do not believe that Grooten was his real name."

She shook her head.

"I have never seen him before in my life," she said. "If I did know I should not tell anyone."

The doctor came at last. In reality it was barely five minutes since he had been sent for, but time dragged itself along slowly in that little room. Directly afterwards Huber, the manager, returned, followed by a sergeant of the police. We all waited for the doctor's examination. I fetched a chair for the child, and she thanked me with a wan little smile. Always she sat with her back to the sofa. There was something terribly suggestive in her utter lack of sympathy with the wounded man.

The doctor finished his examination at last. He came towards us.

"The wound is a very curious one," he said, "and I am afraid that the bullet will be difficult to extract, but it is not in itself serious. It is really only a flesh wound, but the man is suffering from severe shock, and I don't like the action of his heart. He can be removed quite safely. If you like I will telephone for an ambulance and take him to the hospital. Do you know anything about this affair, sergeant?"

"Very little as yet, sir," the man answered. "I want this gentleman's description of the person who showed him the pistol. The commissionaire saw him leave, I understand, and one of the waiters saw something in his hand. Was he a friend of yours, sir?"

"I only know his name," I answered. "He called himself Mr. Grooten, and I judged him to be a foreigner, though he spoke perfect English. He seemed to be about fifty years old, clean-shaven, and of under medium height."

"Too vague," the sergeant remarked. "Had he any peculiarity of feature or expression, anything which would help towards identification?"

"None that I can remember," I answered.

"How was he dressed?"

"Quietly. I could not remember anything that he wore."

"Did he give you any idea of his intention? Did he speak of Major Delahaye at all as though he knew him?"

I shook my head.

"We simply both remarked," I said slowly, "that this — young lady seemed to be very frightened of her companion, and I do not think that we formed a favourable impression of him. He gave me not the slightest intimation, however, of his intention to interfere."

"It could not have been an accident, I suppose?" Mr. Huber suggested.

"I might have thought so," I answered, "if he had not immediately left the place. He disappeared so quickly that I did not even see him go."

"You sat by accident at the same table?" the sergeant asked.

"No, we came together," I answered. "We met at Charing Cross, and he spoke to me. He knew my name, and reminded me that we had once met at the 'Vagabonds' Club.'"

"Did you remember him?"

"I cannot say that I did," I answered.

"And afterwards?"

"We talked together for some time, and when we left the station he asked me to lunch here."

"Did he arrive by train, or was he meeting anyone at Charing Cross?" the sergeant asked.

"Neither, so far as I could see," I answered. "He seemed to be simply loitering. I ought to tell you, though, that we saw Major Delahaye and this young lady arrive by the Continental train, and he seemed to be interested in them."

The sergeant turned to Isobel.

"Did you know him?" he asked.

"No," she answered. "I did not notice him at the station at all. I saw that he was sitting at the same table downstairs as this gentleman, but I am quite sure that I have never seen him before in my life."

The sergeant put away his pocket-book.

"I am very sorry to trouble you," he said, "but I think it would be better for you all to come to Bow Street and see the superintendent."

"I am quite willing to do so," I answered, "though I can tell him no more than I have told you."

The child moved suddenly towards me. Her thin, shabbily gloved fingers gripped my arm with almost painful force. Her eyes were full of passionate appeal.

"I may go with you," she murmured. "You will not leave me alone?"

"The young lady will be required also," the sergeant remarked.

"We will go together, of course," I said gently. "Come!"

CHAPTER V

WE crossed the road from the police-station, and found ourselves in one of the narrow streets fringing Covent Garden. The air was fragrant here with the perfume of white and purple lilac, great baskets full of which were piled up in the gutter. The girl half closed her eyes.

"Delicious!" she murmured. "This reminds me of St. Argeuil! You have flowers too, then, in London?"

I bought her a handful, which she sniffed and held to her face with delight.

"Ah!" she said a little sadly. "I had forgotten that there were any beautiful things left in the world. Thank you so much, Mr. Arnold."

"At your age," I said cheerfully, "you will soon find out that the world—even London—is a treasure-house of beautiful things."

She looked down the narrow, untidy street, strewn with the refuse from the market waggons and trucks which blocked the way, making all but pedestrian traffic an impossibility—at the piles of empty baskets in the gutter, and the slatternly crowd of loiterers. Then she looked up at me with a faint smile.

"London—is not all like this, then?" she remarked.

I shook my head.

"This is a back street, almost a slum," I said. "I daresay you have lived in the country always, and just at first it does not seem possible that there should be anything beautiful about a great city. When you get a little older I think that you will see things differently. The beauty of a great city thronged with men and women is a more subtle thing than the mere joy of meadows and hills and country lanes — but it exists all the same. And now," I continued, stopping short upon the pavement, "I must take you to your friends. Tell me where they live. You have the address, perhaps."

"What friends?" she asked me, with wide-open eyes.

"You told the superintendent of police that you had friends in London," I reminded her.

Then she smiled at me — a very dazzling smile, which showed all her white teeth, and which seemed somehow to become reflected in her dark blue eyes.

"But I meant you!" she exclaimed. "I thought that you knew that! There is no one else. You are my friend, I know very well, for you came and spoke kindly to me when I was terrified — terrified to death."

The shadow of gravity rested only for a moment upon her face. She laughed gaily at my consternation.

"Then where am I to take you?" I asked.

"Stupid," she murmured; "I am going with you, of course. Why — why — you don't mind, do you?" she asked, with a sudden catch in her throat.

I felt like a brute, and I hastened to make what amends I could. I smiled at her reassuringly.

"Mind! Of course I don't mind," I declared. "Only, you see, there are three of us — all men — and we live together. I was afraid ——"

"I shall not mind that at all," she interrupted cheerfully. "If they are nice like you, I think that it will be delightful. There were only girls at the convent, you know, and the sisters, and a few masters who came to teach us things, but they were not allowed to speak to us except to give out the lessons, and they were very stupid. I do not think that I shall be any trouble to you at all. I will try not to be."

I looked at her — a little helplessly. After all, though she was tall for her years, she was only a child. Her dress was of an awkward length, her long straight fringe and plaited hair the coiffure of the schoolroom. The most surprising thing of all in connection with her was that she showed no signs of the tragedy which had so recently been played out around her. Her eyes had lost their nameless fear; there was even colour in her cheeks.

"Come along, then!" I said. "We will turn into the Strand and take a hansom."

She walked buoyantly along by my side, as tall within an inch or so as myself, and with a certain elegance in her gait a little hard to reconcile with her years. All the while she looked eagerly about her, her eyes shining with curiosity.

"We passed through Paris at night," she said, with a little reminiscent shudder, as though every thought connected with that journey were a torture, "and I have never really been in a great city before. I hope you meant what you said," she added, looking

up at me with a quick smile, "and that there are parts of London more beautiful than this."

"Many," I assured her. "You shall see the parks. The rhododendrons will be out soon, and I think that you will find them beautiful, though, of course, the town can never be like the country. Here's a hansom with a good horse. Jump in!"

. . . . . .

I think that our arrival at Number 4, Earl's Crescent, created quite as much sensation as I had anticipated. When I opened the door of the large, barely-furnished room, which we called our workshop, Arthur sprang from the table on which he had been lounging, and Mabane, who was still working, dropped his brush in sheer amazement. I turned towards the girl.

"These are my friends, Isobel, of whom I have been telling you," I said. "This is Mr. Arthur Fielding, who is the ornamental member of the establishment, and that is Mr. Allan Mabane, who paints very bad pictures, but who contrives to make other people think that they are worth buying. Allan, this young lady, Miss Isobel de Sorrens, and I have had a little adventure together. I will explain all about it later on."

They both advanced with extended hands. The girl, as though suddenly conscious of her position, gave a hand to each, and looked at them almost piteously.

"You will not mind my coming," she begged, with a tremulous little note of appeal in her tone. "I do not seem to have any friends, and Mr. Arnold has been so kind to me. If I may stay here for a little

while I will try — oh, I am sure, that I will not be in anyone's way!"

The pathos of her breathless little speech was almost irresistible. The child, as she stood there in the centre of the room, looking eagerly from one to the other, conquered easily. I do not know if either of the other two were conscious of the new note of life which she seemed to bring with her into our shabby, smoke-smelling room, but to me it came home, even in those first few moments, with wonderful poignancy. An alien note it was, but a wonderfully sweet one. We three men had drifted away from the whole world of our womenkind. She seemed to bring us back instantly into touch with some of the few better and rarer memories round which the selfishness of life is always building a thicker crust. For one thing, at that moment I was deeply grateful — that I knew my friends. My task was made a sinecure.

"My dear young lady," Mabane exclaimed, with unmistakeable earnestness, "you are heartily welcome. We are delighted to see you here!"

"More than welcome," Arthur declared. "We are all one here, you know, Miss de Sorrens; and if you are Arnold's friend, you must be ours."

For the first time tears stood in her eyes. She brushed them proudly away.

"You are very, very kind," she said. "I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you both."

Arthur rushed for our one easy-chair, and insisted upon installing her in it. Mabane lit a stove and left the room swinging a kettle. I drew a little sigh of relief, and threw my hat into a corner. Apparently

she had conquered my friends as easily as she had conquered me.

"Arthur," I said, "please entertain Miss de Sorrens for a few moments, will you. I must go and interview Mrs. Burdett."

"I'll do my best, Arnold," he assured me. "Mrs. Burdett's in the kitchen, I think. She came in just before you."

Mrs. Burdett was our housekeeper and sole domestic. She was a hard-featured but kindly old woman, with a caustic tongue and a soft heart. She heard my story unmoved, betraying neither enthusiasm or disapproval. When I had finished, she simply set her cap straight and rubbed her hands upon her apron.

"I'd like to see the child, as you call her, Mr. Arnold," she said. "You young gentlemen are so easy deceived, and it's an unusual thing that you're proposing, not to say inconvenient."

So I took Mrs. Burdett back with me to the studio. As we opened the door the music of the girl's strange little foreign laugh was ringing through the room. Arthur was mounted upon his hobby, talking of the delights of motoring, and she was listening with sparkling eyes. They stopped at once as we entered.

"This is Mrs. Burdett, Isobel," I said, "who looks after us here, and who is going to take charge of you. She will show you your room. I'm sorry that you will find it so tiny, but you can see that we are a little cramped here!"

Isobel rose at once.

"You should have seen our cells at St. Argueil," she exclaimed, smiling. "Some of us who were tall

could scarcely stand upright. May I come with you, Mrs. Burdett?"

Mrs. Burdett's tone and answer relieved me of one more anxiety. The door closed upon them. We three men were alone.

"Is this," Mabane asked curiously, "a practical joke, or a part of your plot? What does it all mean? Where on earth did you come across the child? Who is she?"

I took a cigarette from my case and lit it.

"The responsibility for the whole affair," I declared, "remains with Arthur."

The boy whistled softly. He looked at me with wide-open eyes.

"Come," he declared, "I like that. Why, I have never seen the girl before in my life, or anyone like her. Where do I come in, I should like to know?"

"It was you," I said, "who started me off to Charing Cross."

"You mean to say that you picked her up there?" Mabane exclaimed.

"I will tell you the whole story," I answered. "She comes with the halo of tragedy about her. Listen!"

Then I told them of the things which had happened to me during the last few hours.

CHAPTER VI

I CERTAINLY could not complain of any lack of interest on the part of my auditors. They listened to every word of my story with rapt attention. When I had finished they were both silent for several moments. Mabane eyed me curiously. I think that at first he scarcely knew whether to believe me altogether serious.

"The man who was with the girl," Arthur asked at last — "this Major Delahaye, or whatever his name was — is he dead?"

"He was alive two hours ago," I answered.

"Will he recover?"

"I believe that there is just a bare chance — no more," I answered. "He had a weak heart, and the shock was almost enough to kill him."

"And your friend — the man who shot him — where is he?" Mabane asked. "Is he in custody?"

I shook my head.

"He disappeared," I answered, "as though by magic. You see, we were sitting at the table next the door, and he had every opportunity for slipping out unnoticed."

"It was at the Café Grand, you said, was n't it?" Arthur asked.

I nodded.

"How about the commissionaire, then?"

"He saw the man come out, but he took no particular notice of him," I answered. "He crossed the street at an ordinary walking pace, and he was out of sight before the commotion inside began."

"It seems to me," Mabane remarked, "that you must have found yourself in rather an awkward position."

"I did," I answered grimly. "Of course my story sounded a bit thin, and the police made me go to the station with them. As luck would have it, however, I knew the inspector, and I managed to convince him that I was telling the truth, or I doubt whether they would have let me go. I suppose," I added, a little doubtfully, "that you fellows must think me a perfect idiot for bringing the child here, but upon my word I don't know what else I could have done. I simply could n't leave her there, or in the streets. I 'm awfully sorry —"

"Don't be an ass," Arthur interrupted energetically. "Of course you could n't do anything but bring her here. You acted like a sensible chap for once."

"Have you questioned her," Mabane asked, "about her friends? If she has none in London, she must have some somewhere!"

"I have questioned her," I answered, "but not very successfully. She appears to know nothing about her relations, or even her parentage. She has been at the convent ever since she can remember, and she has seen no one outside it except this man who took her there and came to fetch her away."

"And what relation is he?" Allan asked.

"None! He called himself simply her guardian."

Arthur walked across the room for his pipe, and commenced to fill it.

"Well," he said, "you are like the man in the Scriptures, who found what he went out for to see. You've got your adventure, at any rate. All owing to my advice, too. Hullo!"

We all turned round. The door of the room was suddenly opened and closed. My host of a few hours ago stood upon the threshold, smiling suavely upon us. He wore a low black hat, and a coat somewhat thicker than the season of the year seemed to demand. Every article of attire was different, but his face seemed to defy disguise. I should have known Mr. Grooton anywhere.

His unexpected presence seemed to deprive me almost of my wits. I simply gaped at him like the others.

"Great heavens!" I exclaimed. "You here!"

He stood quite still for a moment, listening. Then he glanced sharply around the room. He looked at Mabane, and he looked at Arthur. Finally he addressed me.

"I fancy that I am a fairly obvious apparition," he remarked. "Where is the child?"

"She is here," I answered, "in another room with our housekeeper just now. But ——"

"I have only a few seconds to spare," Mr. Grooten interrupted ruthlessly. "Listen to me. You have chosen to interfere in this concern, and you must take your part in it now. You have the child, and you must keep her for a time. You must not let her go, on any account. Unfortunately, the man who sold me that pistol was a liar. Delahaye is not dead. It

is possible even that he may recover. Will you swear to keep the child from him?"

I hesitated. It seemed to me that Grooten was taking a great deal for granted.

"You must remember," I said, "that I have absolutely no legal hold upon her. If Delahaye is her guardian it will be quite easy for him to take her away."

"He is not her legal guardian," Grooten said sharply. "He has no just claim upon her at all."

"Neither have I," I reminded him.

"You have possession," Grooten exclaimed. "I tell you that neither Delahaye, if he lives, nor any other person, will appeal to the law to force you to give the child up. This is the truth. I see you still hesitate. Listen! This also is truth. The child is in danger from Delahaye — hideous, unmentionable danger."

I never thought of doubting his word. Truth blazed out from his keen grey eyes; his words carried conviction with them.

"I will keep the child," I promised him. "But tell me who you are, and what you have to do with her."

"No matter," he answered swiftly. "I lay this thing upon you, a charge upon your honour. Guard the child. If Delahaye recovers there will be trouble. You must brave it out. You are an Englishman; you are one of a stubborn, honourable race. Do my bidding in this matter, and you shall learn what gratitude can mean."

Once more he listened for a moment intently. Then he continued.

"I am followed by the police," he said. "They may be here at any moment. You can tell them of my visit if it is necessary. My escape is provided for."

"But surely you will tell me something else about the child," I exclaimed. "Tell me at least ——"

He held out his hand.

"You are safer to know nothing," he said quickly. "Be faithful to what you have promised, and you will never regret it."

With almost incredible swiftness he disappeared. We all three looked at one another, speechless. Then from outside came the sound of light footsteps, and a laugh as from the throat of a singing bird. The door was thrown open, and Isobel entered.

"Such a funny little man has just gone out!" she exclaimed. "He had a handkerchief tied round his face as though he had been fighting. What lazy people!" she added, looking around. "I expected to find tea ready. Will you please tell me some more about motor-cars, Mr. Arthur?"

She sat on a stool in our midst, and chattered while we fed her with cakes, and screamed with laughter at Mabane's toast. The tragedy of a few hours ago seemed to have passed already from her mind. She was all charm and irresponsibility. The gaunt, bare room, which for years had mocked all our efforts at decoration, seemed suddenly a beautiful place. Easily, and with the effortless grace of her fifteen years, she laughed her way into our hearts.

CHAPTER VII

"ARNOLD!"

I waved my left hand.

"Don't disturb me for a few minutes, Allan, there's a good chap," I begged. "I'm hard at it."

"Found your plot, then, eh?"

"I've got a start, anyhow! Give me half an hour. I only want to set the thing going."

Mabane grunted, and took up his brush. For once I was thankful that we were alone. At last I saw my way. After weeks of ineffective scribbling a glimpse of the real thing had come to me.

The stiffness had gone from my brain and fingers. My pen flew over the paper. The joy of creation sang once more in my heart, tingled in all my pulses. We worked together and in silence for an hour or more. Then, with a little sigh of satisfaction, I leaned back in my chair.

"The story goes, then?" Mabane remarked.

"Yes, it goes," I assented, my eyes fixed absently upon the loose sheets of manuscript strewn all over my desk. Already I was finding it hard to tear my thoughts away from it.

There was a short silence. Then Mabane, who had been filling his pipe, came over to my side.

"You heard from the convent this morning, Arnold?"

"Yes! The letter is here. Read it!"

Mabane shook his head.

"I can't read French," he said.

"They want her back again," I told him, thoughtfully. "The woman appears to be honest enough. She admits that they have no absolute claim — they do not even know her parentage. They have been paid, she says, regularly and well for the child's education, and if she is now without a home they would like her to go back to them. She thinks it possible that Major Delahaye's relatives, or the people for whom he acted, might continue the payments, but they are willing to take their risk of that. The long and short of it is, that they want her back again."

"As a pupil still?" Mabane asked.

"They would train her for a teacher. In that case she would have to serve a sort of novitiate. She would practically become a nun."

Mabane withdrew his pipe from his mouth, and looked thoughtfully into the bowl of it.

"I never had a sister," he said, "and I really know nothing whatever about children. But does it occur to you, Arnold, that this — young lady seems particularly adapted for a convent?"

"I believe," I said firmly, "that it would be misery for her."

Mabane walked over to his canvas and came back again.

"What about Delahaye?" he asked.

"He is still unconscious at the hospital," I answered.

Mabane hesitated.

"I do not wish to seem intrusive, Arnold," he said, "but I can't help remembering that a certain

lady with whom you were very friendly once married a Delahaye!"

I nodded.

"I should have told you, in any case," I said. "This is the man — Major Sir William Delahaye, whom Eileen Marigold married."

"Then surely you recognized him in the restaurant?"

"I never met him," I answered. "This marriage was arranged very quickly, as you know, and I was abroad when it took place. I called on Lady Delahaye twice, but I did not meet her husband on either occasion."

Mabane fingered the loose sheets of my manuscript idly.

"Your story, Arnold," he said, "is having a tragic birth. Will Delahaye really die, do you think?"

"The doctors are not very hopeful," I told him. "The wound itself is not mortal, but the shock seems to have affected him seriously. He is not a young man, and he has lived hard all his days."

"If he dies," Mabane said thoughtfully, "your friend Grooten, I think you said he called himself, will have to disappear altogether. In that case I suppose we — shall be compelled to send the child back to the convent?"

"Unless ——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless we provide for her ourselves," I answered boldly.

Mabane smoked furiously for a few moments. His hands were thrust deep down in his trousers pockets. He looked fixedly out of the window.

"Arnold," he said abruptly, "do you believe in presentiments?"

"It depends whether they affect me favourably or the reverse," I answered carelessly. "You Scotchmen are all so superstitious."

"You may call it superstition," Mabane continued. "Everything of the sort which an ignorant man cannot understand he calls superstition. But if you like, I will tell you something which is surely going to happen. I will tell you what I have seen."

I leaned forward in my chair, and looked curiously into Allan's face. His hard, somewhat commonplace features seemed touched for the moment by some transfiguring fire. His keen, blue-grey eyes were as soft and luminous as a girl's. He had actually the appearance of a man who sees a little way beyond the border. Even then I could not take him seriously.

"Speak, Sir Prophet!" I exclaimed, with a little laugh. "Let my eyes also be touched with fire. Let me see what you see."

Mabane showed no sign of annoyance. He looked at me composedly.

"Do not be a fool, Arnold," he said. "You may believe or disbelieve, but some day you will know that the things which I have in my mind are true."

I think that I was a little bewildered. I realized now what at first I had been inclined to doubt—that Mabane was wholly in earnest. Unconsciously my attitude towards him changed. It is hard to mock a man who believes in himself.

"Go ahead, then, Allan," I said quietly. "Remember that you have told me nothing yet."

Mabane turned towards me. He spoke slowly. His face was serious — almost solemn.

"The man Delahaye will never claim the child," he said. "I think that he will die. The man who shot him has gone — we shall not hear of him again, not for many years, if at all. He has gone like a stone dropped into a bottomless tarn. We shall not send the child back to the convent. She will remain here."

He paused, as though expecting me to speak. I shrugged my shoulders.

"Come," I said, "I shall not quarrel with your prophecy so far, Allan. The introduction of a feminine element here seems a little incongruous, but after all she is very young."

Mabane unclasped his arms, and looked thoughtfully around the room. Already there was a change since a few days ago. The ornaments and furniture were free from dust. There were two great bowls of flowers upon the table, some studies which had hung upon the wall were replaced with others of a more sedate character. The atmosphere of the place was different. Wild untidiness had given place to some semblance of order. There was an attempt everywhere at repression. Mabane knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"For five years," he said abstractedly, "you and I and Arthur have lived here together. Are you satisfied with those five years? Think!"

I looked from my desk out of the window, over the housetops up into the sunshine, and I too was grave. Satisfied! Is anyone short of a fool ever satisfied?

"No! I am not," I admitted, a little bitterly.

"Tell me what you think of these five years, Arnold. Tell me the truth," Mabane persisted. "Let me know if your thoughts are the same as mine."

"Drift," I answered. "We have worked a little, and thought a little — but our feet have been on the earth a great deal oftener than our heads have touched the clouds."

"Drift," Mabane repeated. "It is a true word. We have gained a little experience of the wrong sort: we have learnt how to adapt our poor little gifts to the whim of the moment. Such as our talent has been, we have made a servant of it to minister to our physical necessities. We have lived little lives, Arnold — very little lives."

"Go on," I murmured. "This at least is truth!"

Mabane paused. He looked at his pipe, but he did not relight it.

"There is a change coming," he said slowly. "We are going to drift no longer. We are going to be drawn into the maelstrom of life. What it may mean for you and for me and for the boy, I do not know. It will change us — it must change our work. I shall paint no more guesses at realism — after someone else; and you will write no more of princesses, or pull the strings of tinsel-decked puppets, so that they may dance their way through the pages of your gaily-dressed novels. And an end has come to these things, Arnold. No, I am not raving, nor is this a jest. Wait!"

"You speak," I told him, "like a seer. Since when was it given to you to read the future so glibly, my friend?"

Mabane looked at me with grave eyes. There was no shadow of levity in his manner.

"I am not a superstitious man, Arnold," he said, "but I come, after all, of hill-folk, and I believe that there are times when one can feel and see the shadow of coming things. My grandfather knew the day of his death, and spoke of it; my father made his will before he set foot on the steamer which went to the bottom on a calm day between Dover and Ostend. Nothing of this sort has ever come to me before. You yourself have called me too hard-headed, too material for an artist. So I have always thought myself — until to-day. To-day I feel differently."

"Is it this child, then, who is to open the gates of the world to us?" I asked.

"Remember," Mabane answered, "that before many months have passed she will be a woman."

I moved in my chair a little uneasily.

"I wonder," I said, half to myself, "whether I did well to bring her here!"

Mabane laughed shortly.

"It was not you who brought her," he declared. "She was sent."

"Sent?"

"Aye, these things are not of our choosing, Arnold. There is something behind which drives the great wheels. You can call it Fate or God, according to your philosophy. It is there all the time, the one eternal force."

I looked at Mabane steadfastly. He did not flinch.

"Psychologically, my dear Allan," I said, "you appear to be in a very interesting state just now."

Mabane shrugged his shoulders. He crossed the room for some tobacco, and began to refill his pipe.

"Well," he said, "I have finished. To-morrow, I suppose, I shall want to kick myself for having said as much as I have. Listen! Here they come."

Isobel came into the room, followed by Arthur in a leather jacket and breeches. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes danced with excitement. She threw off her tam-o'-shanter, and stood deftly re-arranging for a moment her wind-tossed hair.

"Glorious!" she exclaimed. "Oh, it has been glorious! Mr. Arthur, how can I thank you? I have never enjoyed myself so much in my life. If the Sister Superior could only have seen me — and the girls!"

"Motoring, I presume," Mabane remarked, "is amongst the pleasures denied to the young ladies of the convent?"

She laughed gaily.

"Pleasures! Why, there are no pleasures for those poor girls. One may not even smile, and as for games, even they are not permitted. I think that it is shameful to make such a purgatory of a place. One may not, one could not, be happy there. It is not allowed."

She caught the look which flashed from Mabane to me, and turned instantly around.

"Oh, Monsieur Arnold," she cried breathlessly, "you do not think — I shall not have to return there?"

"Not likely!" Arthur interposed with vigour. "By Jove! if anyone shut you up there again I'd come and fetch you out."

"If we can possibly prevent it," I said slowly, "you shall never return there." Page 53.

The Master Mummer.

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She threw a quick glance of gratitude towards him, but her eyes returned almost immediately to mine. She waited anxiously for me to speak.

"If we can possibly prevent it," I said slowly, "you shall never return there. I do not think that it is at all the proper place for you. But you must remember that we are, after all, people of no authority. Someone might come forward to-morrow with a legal right to claim you, and we should be helpless."

Slowly the colour died away from her cheeks. Her eyes became preternaturally bright and anxious.

"There is no one," she faltered, "except that man. He called himself my guardian."

"Had you seen him before he came to the convent and fetched you away?" I asked.

"Only once," she answered. "He came to St. Argueil about a year ago. I hated him then. I have hated him ever since. I think that if all men were like that I would be content to stay in the convent all my life."

"You don't remember the circumstances under which he took you there, I suppose?" Mabane asked thoughtfully.

She shook her head.

"I do not remember being taken there at all," she answered. "I think that I was not more than four or five years old."

"And all the time no one else has been to see you or written to you?" I asked.

"No one!"

She smothered a little sob as she answered me. It was as though my questions and Mabane's, although I had asked them gently enough, had suddenly

brought home to her a fuller sense of her complete loneliness. Her eyes were full of tears. She held herself proudly, and she fought hard for her self-control. Arthur glanced indignantly at both of us. He had the wit, however, to remain silent.

"There are just one or two more questions, Isobel," I said, "which I must ask you some time or other."

"Now, please, then," she begged.

"Did Major Delahaye ever mention his wife to you?"

"Never."

"You did not even know, then, when you arrived in London where he was taking you?"

"I knew nothing," she admitted. "He behaved very strangely, and I was miserable every moment of the time I was with him. I understood that I was to have a companion and live in London."

I felt my blood run cold for a moment. I did not dare to look at Mabane.

"I do not think," I said, "that you need fear anything more from Major Delahaye, even if he should recover."

"You mean—?" she cried breathlessly.

"We should never give you up to him," I declared firmly.

"Thank God!" she murmured. "Mr. Arnold," she added, looking at me eagerly, "I can paint and sing and play the piano. Can't people earn money sometimes by doing these things? I would work—oh, I am not afraid to work. Could n't I stay here for a little while?"

"Of course you can," I assured her. "And there

is no need at all for you to think about earning money yet. It is not that which troubles us at all. It is the fact that we have no legal claim upon you, and people may come forward at any moment who have."

Arthur glanced towards her triumphantly.

"What did I tell you?" he exclaimed.

She looked timidly across at Mabane.

"The other gentleman won't mind?" she asked timidly.

Mabane smiled at her, and his smile was a revelation even to us who knew him so well.

"My dear young lady," he said, "you will be more than welcome. I have just been telling Arnold that your coming will make the world a different place for us."

The girl's smile was illumining. It seemed to include us all. She held out both her hands. Mabane seized one and bent over it with the air of a courtier. The other was offered to me. Arthur was content to beam upon us all from the background. At that precise moment came a tap at the door. Mrs. Burdett brought in a telegram.

I tore it open, and hastily reading it, passed it on to Mabane. He hesitated for a moment, and then turned gravely to Isobel.

"Major Delahaye will not trouble you any more," he said. "He died in the hospital an hour ago."

CHAPTER VIII

"A SHADE more to the right, please. There, just as you are now! Don't move! In five minutes I shall have finished for the day."

Isobel smiled.

"I think that your five minutes," she said, "last sometimes for a very long time. But I am not tired — no, not at all. I can stay like this if you wish until the light goes."

"You are splendid," Mabane murmured. "The best sitter — oh, hang it, who's that?"

"There is certainly some one at the door," Isobel remarked.

Mabane paused in his work to shout fiercely, "Come in!" I too looked up from my writing. A woman was ushered into the room—a woman dressed in fashionable mourning, of medium height, and with a wealth of fair, fluffy hair, which seemed to mock the restraining black bands. Mrs. Burdett, visibly impressed, lingered in the background.

The woman paused and looked around. She looked at me, and the pen slipped from my nerveless fingers. I rose to my feet.

"Eil— Lady Delahaye!" I exclaimed.

She inclined her head. Her demeanour was cold, almost belligerent.

"I am glad to find you here, Arnold Greatson," she said. "You are a friend, I believe, of the man who murdered my husband?"

"You have been misinformed, Lady Delahaye," I answered quietly. "I was not even an acquaintance of his. We met that day for the first time."

By the faintest possible curl of the lips she expressed her contemptuous disbelief.

"Ah!" she said. "I remember your story at the inquest. You will forgive me if, in company, I believe, with the majority who heard it, I find it a trifle improbable."

I looked at her gravely. This was the woman with whom I had once believed myself in love, the woman who had jilted me to marry a man of whom even his friends found it hard to speak well.

"Lady Delahaye," I said, "my story may have sounded strangely, but it was true. I presume that you did not come here solely with the purpose of expressing your amiable opinion of my veracity?"

"You are quite right," she admitted drily. "I did not."

She was silent for a few moments. Her eyes were fixed upon Isobel, and I did not like their expression.

"May I offer you a chair, Lady Delahaye?" I asked.

"Thank you, I prefer to stand — here," she answered. "This, I believe, is the young person who was with my husband?"

She extended a sombrely gloved forefinger towards Isobel, who met her gaze unflinchingly.

"That is the young lady," I answered. "Have you anything to say to her?"

"My errand here is with her," Lady Delahaye declared. "What is it that you call yourself, girl?"

Isobel was a little bewildered. She seemed scarcely able to appreciate Lady Delahaye's attitude.

"My name," she said, "is Isobel de Sorrens."

"You asserted at the inquest," Lady Delahaye continued, "that my husband was your guardian. What did you mean by such an extraordinary statement?"

Isobel seemed suddenly to grasp the situation. Her finely arched eyebrows were raised, her cheeks were pink, her eyes sparkling. She rose slowly to her feet, and, child though she was, the dignity of her demeanour was such that Lady Delahaye with her accusing forefinger seemed to shrink into insignificance.

"I think," she said, "that you are a very rude person. Major Delahaye took me to the convent of St. Argueil when I was four years old, and left me there. He visited me twelve months ago, and brought me to England you know when. I was with him for less than twenty-four hours, and I was very unhappy indeed all the time. I did not understand the things which he said to me, nor did I like him at all. I think that if he had left me out of his sight for a moment I should have run away."

Lady Delahaye was very pale, and her eyes were full of unpleasant things. I found myself looking at her, and marvelling at the folly which I had long since forgotten.

"You perhaps complained of him — to his murderer! It is you, no doubt, who are responsible for my husband's death!"

Isobel's lips curled contemptuously.

"Major Delahaye," she said, "did not permit me

to speak to anyone. As for the man whom you call his murderer, I never saw him before in my life, nor should I recognize him again if I saw him now. I do not know why you come here and say all these unkind things to me. I have done you no harm. I am very sorry about Major Delahaye, but — but — "

Her lips quivered. I hastily interposed.

"Lady Delahaye," I said, "I do not know what the immediate object of your visit here may be, but ——"

"The immediate object of my visit," she interrupted coldly, "is as repugnant to me, Mr. Greatson, as it may possibly be disappointing to you. I am here, however, to carry out my husband's last wish. This child herself has asserted that he was her guardian. By his death that most unwelcome post devolves upon me."

Isobel turned white, as though stung by a sudden apprehension. She looked towards me, and I took her hand in mine. Lady Delahaye smiled unpleasantly upon us both.

"You mean," I said, "that you wish to take her away from us?"

"Wish!" Lady Delahaye repeated coldly. "I can assure you that I am not consulting my own wishes upon the subject at all. What I am doing is simply my duty. The child had better get her hat on."

Isobel did not move, but she turned very pale. Her eyes seemed fastened upon mine. She waited for me to speak. The situation was embarrassing enough so far as I was concerned, for Lady Delahaye was obviously in earnest. I tried to gain time.

"May I ask what your intentions are with regard

to the child? You intend to take her to your home — to adopt her, I suppose?"

Lady Delahaye regarded me with cold surprise.

"Certainly not," she answered. "I shall find a fitting position for her in her own station of life."

"May I assume then," I continued, with some eagerness, "that you know what that is? You are acquainted, perhaps, with her parentage?"

She returned my gaze steadily.

"I may be," she answered. "That, however, is beside the question. I intend to do my duty by the child. If you have been put to any expense with regard to her, you can mention the amount and I will defray it. I have answered enough questions. What is your name, child — Isobel? Get ready to come with me."

Isobel answered her steadily, but her eyes were filled with shrinking fear.

"I do not wish to come with you," she said. "I do not like you at all."

Lady Delahaye raised her eyebrows. It seemed to me that in a quiet way she was becoming angry.

"Unfortunately," she said, "your liking or disliking me makes very little difference. I have no choice in the matter at all. The care of you has devolved upon me, and I must undertake it. You had better come at once."

Isobel trembled where she stood. I judged it time to intervene.

"Lady Delahaye," I said, "the duty of looking after this child is evidently a distasteful one to you. We will relieve you of it. She can remain with us."

Lady Delahaye looked at me in astonishment.

Then she laughed, and it seemed to all of us that we had never heard a more unpleasant travesty of mirth.

"Indeed!" she exclaimed. "And may I ask of whom your household consists?"

"Of myself and my two friends, Mabane and Fielding. We have a most responsible housekeeper, however, who will be able to look after the child."

"Until she herself can qualify for the position, I presume," Lady Delahaye remarked drily. "What a delightful arrangement! A sort of co-operative household. Quite Arcadian, I am sure, and so truly philanthropic. You have changed a good deal during the last few years, Mr. Arnold Greatson, to be able to stand there and make such an extraordinary proposition to me."

I was determined not to lose my temper, though, as a matter of fact, I was fiercely angry.

"Lady Delahaye," I said, "we are not prepared to give this child up to you. It will perhaps help to shorten a — a painful interview if you will accept that from me as final."

The change in Isobel was marvellous. The brilliant colour streamed into her cheeks. Her long-drawn, quivering sigh of relief seemed in the momentary silence which followed my pronouncement a very audible thing. Lady Delahaye looked at me as though she doubted the meaning of my words.

"You are aware," she said, "that this will mean great unpleasantness for you. You know the law?"

"I neither know it nor wish to know it," I answered. "We shall not give up the child."

I glanced at Mabane. His confirmation was swift and decisive.

"I am entirely in accord with my friend, madam," he said, with grim precision.

"The law will compel you," she declared.

"We will do our best, then," he answered, "to cheat the law."

"I should like to add, Lady Delahaye," I continued, "that our housekeeper, who has been in the service of my family for over thirty years, has willingly undertaken the care of the child, and I can assure you, in case you should have any anxieties concerning her, that she will be as safe under our charge as in your own."

Lady Delahaye moved towards the door. On the threshold she turned and laid her hand upon my arm. I was preparing to show her out. There was meaning in her eyes as she leaned towards me.

"Mr. Greatson," she said, "we were once friends, or I should drive straight from here to my solicitors. I presume you are aware that your present attitude is capable of very serious misrepresentation?"

"I must take the risk of that, Lady Delahaye," I answered. "I ask you to remember, however, that the law would also require you to prove your guardianship. Do you yourself know anything of the child's parentage?"

She did not answer me directly.

"I shall give you," she said, "twenty-four hours for reflection. At the end of that time, if I do not hear from you, I shall apply to the courts."

I held the door open and bowed.

"You will doubtless act," I said, "according to your discretion."

The moment seemed propitious for her departure. All that had to be said had surely passed between us. Yet she seemed for some reason unwilling to go.

"I am not sure, Mr. Greatson," she said, "that I can find my way out. Will you be so good as to see me to my carriage?"

I had no alternative but to obey. Our rooms were on the fifth floor of a block of flats overlooking Chelsea Embankment, and we had no lift. We descended two flights of the stone stairs in silence. Then she suddenly laid her fingers upon my arm.

"Arnold," she said softly, "I never thought that we should meet again like this."

"Nor I, Lady Delahaye," I answered, truthfully enough.

"You have changed."

I looked at her. She had the grace to blush.

"Oh, I know that I behaved badly," she murmured, "but think how poor we were, and oh, how weary I was of poverty. If I had refused Major Delahaye I think that my mother would have turned me out of doors. I wrote and told you all about it."

"Yes," I admitted, "you wrote!"

"And you never answered my letter."

"It seemed to me," I remarked, "that it needed no answer."

"And afterwards," she said, "I wrote and asked you to come and see me."

"Lady Delahaye——" I began.

"Eileen!" she interrupted.

"Very well, then, if you will have it so, Eileen,"

I said. "You have alluded to events which I have forgotten. Whether you or I behaved well or ill does not matter in the least now. It is all over and done with."

"You mean, then, that I am unforgiven?"

"On the contrary," I assured her, "I have nothing to forgive."

She flashed a swift glance of reproach up on me. To my amazement there were tears in her eyes.

"Mr. Greatson," she said, "I can find my way to the street alone. I will not trouble you further."

She swept away with a dignity which became her better than her previous attitude. There was nothing left for me to do but to turn back.

CHAPTER IX

ISOBEL was standing quite still in the middle of the room, her hands tightly clenched, a spot of colour aflame in her cheeks. Arthur, who had passed Lady Delahaye and me upon the stairs, had apparently just been told the object of her visit.

"Oh, I hate that woman!" Isobel exclaimed as I entered, "I hate her! I would rather die than go to her. I would rather go back to the convent. She looks at me as though I were something to be despised, something which should not be allowed to go alive upon the earth!"

Arthur would have spoken, but Mabane interrupted him. He laid his hand gently upon her shoulder.

"Isobel," he said gently, "you need have no fear. I know how Arnold feels about it, and I can speak for myself also. You shall not go to her. We will not give you up. I do not believe that she will go to the courts at all. I doubt if she has any claim."

"Why, we 'd hide you, run away with you, anything," Arthur declared impetuously. "Don't you be scared, Isobel, I don't believe she can do a thing. The law 's like a great fat animal. It takes a plaguey lot to move it, and then it moves as slowly as a steam-roller. We 'll dodge it somehow."

She gave them a hand each. Her action was almost regal. It some way, it seemed that in accord-

ing her our protection we were receiving rather than conferring a favour.

"My friends," she said, "you are so kind that I have no words with which to thank you. But you will believe that I am grateful."

It was then for the first time that they saw me upon the threshold. Isobel looked at me anxiously.

"She has gone?"

I nodded.

"I do not think that she will trouble us again just yet," I said. "At the same time, we must be prepared. Tell me, whereabouts is this school from which you came, Isobel?"

"St. Argueil? It is about three hours' journey from Paris. Why do you ask?"

"Because I think that I must go there," I answered. "We must try and find out what legal claims Major Delahaye had upon you. What is the name of the Principal?"

"Madame Richard is the lay principal," Isobel answered, "but Sister Ursula is really the head of the place. We girls saw her, though, very seldom — only those who were going to remain," she added, with a little shudder.

"And this Madame Richard," I asked, "is she a kindly sort of a person?"

Isobel shook her head doubtfully.

"I did not like her," she said. "She is very stern. She is not kind to anyone."

"Nevertheless, I suppose she will tell me what she knows," I said. "Give me the Bradshaw, Allan, and that old Continental guide."

I presently became immersed in planning out my

route. When at last I looked up, Mabane was working steadily. The others had gone. I looked round the room.

"Where are Arthur and Isobel?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Like calling to like," he remarked tersely. "They have gone trailing."

I put the Bradshaw down.

"I shall leave for Paris at midnight, Mabane," I said.

He nodded.

"It seems to be the most sensible thing to do," he remarked. "There is no other way of getting to the bottom of the affair."

So I went to pack my bag. And within an hour I was on my way to France.

. . . . . .

I rose to my feet, after a somewhat lengthy wait, and bowed. Between this newcomer and myself, across the stone floor, lay the sunlight, a long, yellow stream which seemed to me the only living thing which I had as yet seen in this strange, grim-looking building. I spoke in indifferent French. She answered me in perfect English.

"I have the honour to address ——"

"Madame Richard. I am the lay principal of the convent. Will you permit me?"

The blind fell, and there was no more sunlight. I was conscious of a sudden chill. The bare room, with its stone-flagged floor, its plain deal furniture, depressed me no less than the cold, forbidding appearance of the woman who stood now motionless before me. She was paler than any woman whom

I had ever seen in my life. A living person, she seemed the personification of lifelessness. Her black hair was streaked with grey; her dress, which suggested a uniform in its severity, knew no adornment save the plain ivory cross which hung from an almost invisible chain about her neck. Her expression indicated neither curiosity nor courtesy. She simply waited. I, although as a rule I had no great difficulty in finding words, felt myself almost embarrassed.

"I have come from London to see you," I said. "My name is Greatson — Arnold Greatson."

There was not a quiver of expression in her cold acknowledgment of my declaration. Nevertheless, at that moment I received an inspiration. I was perfectly sure that she knew who I was and what I had come for.

"I have come to know," I continued, "if you can give me any information as to the friends or parentage of a young lady who was recently, I believe, a pupil of yours — a Miss Isobel de Sorrens?"

"The young lady is still in your charge, I hear," Madame Richard remarked quietly.

Notwithstanding my inspiration I was startled.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"We despatched a messenger only yesterday to escort Isobel back here," Madame Richard answered. "Your address was the destination given us."

"May I ask who gave it you? At whose instigation you sent?"

"At the instigation of those who have the right to consider themselves Isobel's guardians," Madame Richard said quietly.

"Isobel's guardians!" I repeated softly. "But

surely you know, Madame Richard — you have heard of the tragedy which happened in London? Major Delahaye died last week."

"We have been informed of the occurrence," she answered, her tone as perfectly emotionless as though she had been discussing the veriest trifle. "We were content to recognize Major Delahaye as representing those who have the right to dispose of Isobel's future. His death, however, alters many things. Isobel will be placed in even surer hands."

"Isobel has, I presume, then, relatives living?" I remarked. "May I know their names?"

Madame Richard was silent for a moment. She was regarding me steadily. I even fancied that the ghost of a hard smile trembled upon her lips.

"I have no authority to disclose any information whatever," she said.

I bowed.

"I have no desire to seem inquisitive," I said. "On the other hand, I and my friends are greatly interested in the child. I will be frank with you, Madame Richard. We have no claim upon her, I know, but we should certainly require to know something about the people into whose charge she was to pass before we gave her up."

"She is to come back here," Madame Richard answered calmly. "We are ready to receive her. She has lived with us for ten years. I presume under the circumstances, and when I add that it is the desire of those who are responsible for her that she should immediately return to us, that you will not hesitate to send her?"

"Madame Richard," I answered gravely, "you

who live so far from the world lose touch sometimes with its worst side. We others, to our sorrow, know more, though our experience is dearly enough bought. Let me tell you that I should hesitate at any time to give back the child into the care of those who sent her out into the world alone with such a man as Major Delahaye."

Madame Richard touched the cross which hung upon her bosom. Her eyes, it seemed to me, narrowed a little.

"Major Delahaye," she said, "was the nominee of those who have the right to dispose of the child."

"Then," I answered, "I shall require their right proven before Isobel leaves us. I do not wish to speak ill of the dead, but I was present when Major Delahaye was shot, and I am not sure that the bullet of his assassin did not prevent a worse crime. The child was terrified to death. It is my honest conviction that her fear was not uncalled for."

Madame Richard raised her hand slightly.

"Monsieur," she said, "such matters are not our concern. It is because of the passions and evil doing of the world outside that we cling so closely here to our own doctrine of isolation. Whatever she may have suffered, Isobel will learn to forget here. In the blessed years which lie before her, the memory of her unhappy pilgrimage will grow dim and faint. It may even be for the best that she has realized for a moment the shadow of evil things."

"Isobel is intended, then?" I asked.

"For the Church," Madame Richard answered. "That is the present decision of those who have the right to decide for her. We ourselves do not care

to take pupils who have no idea at all of the novitiate. Occasionally we are disappointed, and those in whom we have placed faith are tempted back into the world. But we do our best while they are here to show them the better way. We feared that we had lost Isobel. We shall be all the more happy to welcome her back."

I shivered a little. I could not help feeling the cold repression of the place. A vision of thin, grey-gowned figures, with pallid faces and weary, discontented eyes, haunted me. I tried to fancy Isobel amongst them. It was preposterous.

"Madame," I said, "I do not believe that Isobel is adapted by nature or disposition for such a life."

"The desire for holiness," Madame Richard answered, "is never very apparent in the young. It is the child's great good fortune that she will grow into it."

"I am afraid," I answered, "that our views upon this matter are too far apart to render discussion profitable. You have spoken of those who have the right to dispose of the child's future. I will go and see them."

"It is not necessary," Madame Richard answered. "We will send to England for the child."

"Do I understand, Madame Richard," I said, "that you decline to give me the address of those who stand behind you in the disposal of Isobel?"

"They would not discuss the matter with you," she answered calmly. "Their decision is already made. Isobel is for the Church."

I took up my hat.

"I will not detain you any further, Madame," I said.

"A messenger is already in London to bring back the child," she remarked.

"As to that," I answered, "it is perhaps better to be frank with you, Madame Richard. Your messenger will return alone."

For the first time the woman's face showed some signs of feeling. Her dark eyebrows contracted a little. Her expression was coldly repellent.

"You have no claim upon the child," she said.

"Neither do I know of any other person who has," I answered.

"We have had the charge of her for ten years. That itself is a claim. It is unseemly that she should remain with you."

"Madame," I answered, "Isobel is meant for life — not a living death."

The woman crossed herself.

"There is but one life," she said. "We wish to prepare Isobel for it."

"Madame," I said, "as to that, argument between us is impossible. I shall consult with my friends. Your messenger shall bring back word as to our decision."

The face of the woman grew darker.

"But surely," she protested, "you will not dare to keep the child?"

"Madame," I answered, "humanity makes sometimes strange claims upon us. Isobel is as yet a child. She came into my keeping by the strangest of chances. I did not seek the charge of her. It was, to tell the truth, an embarrassment to me. Yet she is under my care to-day, and I shall do what I believe to be the right thing."

"Monsieur," she said, "you are interfering in matters greater than you have any knowledge of."

"It is in your power," I reminded her, "to enlighten me."

"It is not a power which I am able to use," she answered.

"Then I will not detain you further, Madame," I said.

As I passed out she leaned over towards me. She had already rung a bell, and outside I could hear the shuffling footsteps of the old servant who had admitted me.

"Monsieur," she said, "if you keep the child you make enemies — very powerful enemies. It is long since I lived in the world, but I think that the times have not changed very much. Of the child's parentage I may not tell you, but as I hope for salvation I will tell you this. It will be better for you, and better for the child, that she comes back here, even to embrace what you have called the living death."

"Madame," I said, "I will consider all these things."

"It will be well for you to do so, Monsieur," she said with meaning. "An enemy of those in whose name I have spoken must needs be a holy man, for he lives hand in hand with death."

CHAPTER X

SO I was driven back to Argueil, the red-tiled, sleepy old town, with its great gaunt church, whose windows, as the lumbering cart descended the hill, were stained blood-red by the dying sunset. Behind, on the hillside, was the convent, with its avenue of stunted elms, its close-barred windows, its terrible prison-like silence. As I looked behind, holding on to the sides of the springless cart to avoid being jostled into the road, I found myself shivering. The convent boarding-schools which I had heard of had been very different sort of places. Even after my brief visit there this return into the fresh country air, the smell of the fields, the colour and life of the rolling landscape, were blessed things. I was more than ever satisfied with my decision. It was not possible to send the child back to such a place.

Across a great vineyard plain, through which the narrow white road ran like a tightly drawn band of ribbon, I came presently to the village of Argueil. The street which led to the inn was paved with the most abominable cobbles, and I was forced to hold my hat with one hand and the side of the cart with the other. My blue-smocked driver pulled up with a flourish in front of the ancient gateway of the

Leon d'Or, and I was very nearly precipitated on to the top of the broad-backed horse. As I gathered myself together I was conscious of a soft peal of laughter — a woman's laughter, which came from the arched entrance to the inn. I looked up quickly. A too familiar figure was standing there watching me, — Lady Delahaye, trim, elegant, a trifle supercilious. By her side stood the innkeeper, white-aproned and obsequious.

I clambered down on to the pavement, and Lady Delahaye advanced a little way to meet me. She held out a delicately gloved hand, and smiled.

"You must forgive my laughing, Arnold," she said. "Really, you looked too funny in that terrible cart. What an odd meeting, is n't it? Have you a few minutes to spare?"

"I believe," I answered, "that I cannot get away from this place till the evening. Shall we go in and sit down?"

She shook her head.

"The inn-parlour is too stuffy," she answered. "I was obliged to come out myself for some fresh air. Let us walk up the street."

I paid for my conveyance, and we strolled along the broad sidewalk. Lady Delahaye seemed inclined to thrust the onus of commencing our conversation upon me.

"I presume," I said, "that we are here with the same object?"

She glanced at me curiously.

"Indeed!" she remarked. "Then tell me why you came."

"To discover that child's parentage, if possible,"

I answered promptly. "I want to discover who her friends are, who really has the right to take charge of her."

"You perplex me, Arnold," she said thoughtfully. "I do not understand your position in the matter. I always looked upon you as a somewhat indolent person. Yet I find you now taking any amount of trouble in a matter which really does not concern you at all. Whence all this good-nature?"

"Lady Delahaye ——"

"Eileen," she interrupted softly.

"Lady Delahaye," I answered firmly. "You must forgive me if I remind you that I have no longer the right to call you by any other name. I am not good-natured, and I am afraid that I am still indolent. Nevertheless, I am interested in this child, and I intend to do my utmost to prevent her returning to this place."

"I am still in the dark," she said, looking at me curiously. "She is nothing to you. A more unsuitable home for her than with three young men I cannot imagine. You seem to want to keep her there. Why? She is a child to-day, it is true — but in little more than a year's time she will be a woman. The position then for you will be full of embarrassments."

"I find the position now," I answered, "equally embarrassing. We can only give the child up to you, send her back to the convent, or keep her ourselves. Of the three we prefer to keep her."

"You seem to have a great distaste for the convent," she remarked, "but that is because you are

not a Catholic, and you do not understand these things. She would at least be safe there, and in time, I think, happy."

We were at the head of the village street now, upon a slight eminence. I pointed backwards to the prison-like building, standing grim and desolate on the bare hillside.

"I should consider myself no less a murderer than the man who shot your husband," I answered, "if I sent her there. I have made all the enquiries I could in the neighbourhood, and I have added to them my own impressions. The secular part of the place may be conducted as other places of its sort, but the great object of Madame Richard's sister is to pass her pupils from that into the religious portion. Isobel is not adapted for such a life."

Lady Delahaye shrugged her shoulders.

"Well," she said, "I am a Catholic, so of course I don't agree with you. But why do you hesitate to give the child up to me?"

I was silent for a moment. It was not easy to put my feeling into words.

"Lady Delahaye," I said, "you must forgive my reminding you that on the occasion of your visit to us you did not attempt to conceal the fact that your feelings towards her were inimical. Beyond that, I was pledged not to hand her back into your husband's care, and ——"

"Pledged by whom?" she asked quickly.

"I am afraid," I said, "that I cannot answer you that question."

She flashed an angry glance upon me.

"You pretend that the man who called himself

Grooten was not your friend. Yet you have been in communication with him since!"

"I saw Mr. Grooten for the first time in my life on the morning of that day," I answered.

"You know where he is now?" she asked, watching me keenly.

"I have not the slightest idea. I wish that I did know," I declared truthfully. "There is no man whom I am more anxious to see."

"You would, of course, inform the police?" she asked.

"I am afraid not," I answered.

Again she was angry. This time scarcely without reason.

"Your sympathies, in short, are with the murderer rather than with his victim — the man who was shot without warning in the back? It accords, I presume, with your idea of fair play?"

"Lady Delahaye," I said, "the subject is unpleasant and futile. Let us return to the inn."

She turned abruptly around. She made a little motion as of dismissal, but I remained by her side.

"By-the-bye," I said, "we were to exchange confidences. You are here, of course, to visit the convent? Why?"

She smiled enigmatically.

"I am not sure, my very simple conspirator," she said, "whether I will imitate your frankness. You see, you have blundered into a somewhat more important matter than you have any idea of. But I will tell you this, if you like. You may call that place a prison, or any hard names you please — yet

it is destined to be Isobel's home. Not only that, but it is her only chance. I am putting you on your guard, you see, but I do not think that it matters. You are fighting against hopeless odds, and if by any chance you should succeed, your success would be the most terrible thing which could happen to Isobel."

I walked by her side for a moment in silence. There was in her words and tone some underlying note of fear, some suggestion of hidden danger, which brought back to my mind at once the farewell speech of Madame Richard. There was something ominous, too, in her presence here.

"Lady Delahaye," I said, as lightly as possible, "you have told me a great deal, and less than nothing at all. Yet I gather that you know more about the child and her history than you have led me to suppose."

"Yes," she admitted, "that is perhaps true."

"Why not let me share your knowledge?" I suggested boldly.

"You carry candour," she remarked, smiling, "to absurdity. We are on opposite sides. Ah, how delicious this is!"

We were regaining the centre of the little town by a footpath which for some distance had followed the river, and now, turning almost at right angles, skirted a cherry orchard in late blossom. The perfume of the pink and white buds, swaying slightly in the breeze, came to us both — a waft of delicate and poignant freshness. Lady Delahaye stood still, and half closed her eyes.

"How perfectly delicious," she murmured. "Arn—

Mr. Greatson, do get me just the tiniest piece. I can't quite reach."

I broke off a small branch, and she thrust it into the bosom of her dress. The orchard was gay with bees and a few early butterflies, blue and white and orange coloured. In the porch of a red-tiled cottage a few yards away a girl was singing. Suddenly I stopped and pointed.

"Look!"

An avenue with a gate at the end led through the orchard, and under the drooping boughs we caught a glimpse of the convent away on the hillside. Greyer and more stern than ever it seemed through the delicate framework of soft green foliage and blossoms.

"Lady Delahaye," I said, "you are yourself a young woman. Could you bear to think of banishing from your life for ever all the colour and the sweet places, all the joy of living? Would you be content to build for yourself a tomb, to commit yourself to a living death?"

She answered me instantly, almost impulsively.

"There is all the difference in the world," she declared. "I am a woman; although I am not old, I know what life is. I know what it would be to give it up. But the child — she knows nothing. She is too young to know what lies before her. As yet her eyes are not opened. Very soon she would be content there."

I shook my head. I did not agree with Lady Delahaye.

"Indeed no!" I protested. "You reckon nothing for disposition. In her heart the song of life is already formed, the joy of it is already stirring in her

blood. The convent would be slow torture to her. She shall not go there!"

Lady Delahaye smiled — mirthlessly, yet as one who has some hidden knowledge which she may not share.

"You think yourself her friend," she said. "In reality you are her enemy. If not the convent, then worse may befall her."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"As to that," I said, "we shall see!"

We resumed our walk. Again we were nearing the inn. Lady Delahaye looked at me every now and then curiously. My feeling towards her had grown more and more belligerent.

"You puzzle me, Arnold," she said softly. "After all, Isobel is but a child. What cunning tune can she have played upon your heartstrings that you should espouse her cause with so much fervour? If she were a few years older one could perhaps understand."

I disregarded her innuendo.

"Lady Delahaye," I said, "if you were as much her friend as I believe that I am, you would not hesitate to tell me all that you know. I have no other wish than to see her safe, and amongst her friends, but I will give her up to no one whom I believe to be her enemy."

"Arnold," she answered gravely, "I can only repeat what I have told you before. You are interfering in greater concerns than you know of. Even if I would, I dare not give you any information. The fate of this child, insignificant in herself though she is, is bound up with very important issues."

Our eyes met for a moment. The expression in

hers puzzled me — puzzled me to such an extent that I made her no answer. Slowly she extended her hand.

"At least," she said, "let us part friends — unless you choose to be gallant and wait here for me until to-morrow. It is a dreary journey home alone."

I took her hand readily enough.

"Friends, by all means," I answered, "but I must get back to Paris to-night. A messenger from Madame Richard is already waiting for me in London."

She withdrew her hand quickly, and turned away.

"It must be as you will, of course," she said coldly. "I do not wish to detain you."

Nevertheless, her farewell look haunted me as I sped across the great fertile plain on my way to Paris.

CHAPTER XI

MABANE laid down his brush, Arthur sprang from his seat upon the table and greeted me with a shout. Isobel said nothing, but her dark blue eyes were fastened upon my face as though seeking to read her fate there. They had evidently been waiting for my coming. I remember thinking it strange, even then, that these other two men should apparently share to the fullest degree my own interest in the child's fate.

"I have failed," I announced shortly.

I took Isobel's hand. It was cold as ice, and I could feel that she was trembling violently.

"Madame Richard would tell me nothing, Isobel," I said. "I believe that she knows all about you, and I believe that Lady Delahaye does too. But they will tell me nothing."

"And?" she demanded, with quivering lips. "And?"

"It is for you to decide," I said gravely. "Lady Delahaye wants you, so does Madame Richard. On the other hand, if you like to stay with us until someone proves their right to take you away, you will be very welcome, Isobel! Stop one moment," I added hastily, for I saw the quick colour stream into her cheeks, and the impetuous words already trembling upon her lips, "I want you to remember this: Madame Richard makes no secret of her own wishes

as regards your future. She desires you to take the veil. You have lived at the convent, so I presume you are able to judge for yourself as regards that. Lady Delahaye, on the other hand, is a rich woman, and she professes to be your friend. Your life with her, if she chose to make it so, would be an easy and a pleasant one. We, as you know, are poor. We have very little indeed to offer you. We live what most people call a shiftless life. We have money one day, and none the next. Our surroundings and our associations are not in the least like what a child of your age should become accustomed to. Nine people out of ten would probably pronounce us utterly unsuitable guardians for you. It is only right that you should understand these things."

She looked at me with tear-bedimmed eyes.

"I want to stay with you," she pleaded. "Don't send me away — oh, don't! I hate the convent, and I am afraid of Lady Delahaye. I will do everything I can not to be a nuisance to you. I am not afraid to work, or to help Mrs. Burdett. Only let me stay."

I smiled, and looked around at the others.

"It is settled," I declared. "We appoint ourselves your guardians. You agree, Mabane?"

"Most heartily," he answered.

"And you, Arthur?"

"Great heavens, yes!" he answered vehemently.

"You are very good," she murmured, "very good to me. All my life I shall remember this."

She held out both her hands. Her eyes were fixed still upon mine. Mabane laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"Dear child," he said, "do not forget that there

are three of us. I too am very happy to be one of your guardians."

She gave him the hand which Arthur had seized upon. I think that we had none of us before seen a smile so dazzling as hers.

"Dear friends," she murmured, "I only hope that you will never regret this great, great kindness."

Then suddenly she flitted away and went to her room. We three men were left alone.

I think that for the first few moments there was some slight awkwardness, for we were men, and we spoke seldom of the things which touched us most. Arthur, however, broke almost immediately into speech, and relieved the tension.

"And to think that it was I," he exclaimed, "who sent you out plot hunting to the station! Arnold, what a sensible chap you are!"

We all laughed.

"A good many people," Mabane remarked quietly, "would call us three fools. Tell us, Arnold, did you really discover nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing," I declared. "Stop, though. I did find out this. There is some secret about the child's parentage. I have spoken with two people who know it, and one of them warned me that in keeping the child we were interfering in a greater matter than we had any idea of. Of course it might have been a bluff, but I fancy that Lady Delahaye was in earnest."

"You do not think," Mabane asked, "that she was Major Delahaye's daughter?"

"I do not," I answered, with a little shudder. "I am sure that she was not."

"Whoever she is," Arthur declared, "there's one thing jolly certain, and that is she's thoroughbred. She has the most marvellous nerve I ever knew. We got in a tight corner this morning. I took her down to Guildford in a trailer, and I had to jump the pavement to avoid a runaway. She never flinched for a moment. Half the girls I know would have squealed like mad. She only laughed, and asked whether she should get out. She's as thoroughbred as they make them."

"Perhaps," I answered, "but I'm not going to have you risk her life with your beastly motoring, Arthur. Take her out in a car, if you want to. Who's this?"

We turned towards the door. Was it the ghost of Madame Richard who stood there pale, cold, and in the sombre garb of her sisterhood?

"This lady has been before," Mabane said, placing a chair for her. "She has come from the convent, and she brought a letter from Madame Richard."

"You are Mr. Greatson?" she asked.

I bowed, and took the letter which she handed to me. I tore it open. It contained a few lines only.

"SIR, —

"I have been informed of the unfortunate event which has placed under your protection one of my late pupils, Isobel de Sorrens. We are willing and anxious to receive her back here, and I have sent the bearer to accompany her upon the journey. She will also defray what expenses her sojourn with you may have occasioned.

"I am, sir, yours respectfully,

"EMILY RICHARD."

I put the letter back in the envelope and laid it upon the table.

"I have seen Madame Richard," I said. "The child will remain with us for the present."

The cold, dark eyes met mine searchingly.

"But, monsieur," the woman said, "how can that be? You are not a relative, you surely have no claim ——"

"It will save time, perhaps," I interrupted, "if I explain that I have discussed all these matters with Madame Richard, and the decision which I have come to is final. The child remains here."

The woman looked at me steadfastly.

"Madame Richard will not be satisfied with that decision," she said. "You will be forced to give her up."

"And why," I asked, "should a penniless orphan, as I understand Isobel is, be of so much interest to Madame Richard?"

The woman watched me still, and listened to my words as though seeking to discover in them some hidden meaning. Then she leaned a little towards me.

"Can I speak with you alone, monsieur?" she said.

"These are my friends," I answered, "from whom I have no secrets."

"None?"

"None," I repeated.

She hesitated. Then, although the door was fast closed, she dropped her voice.

"You know — who the child is," she said softly.

"Upon my word, I do not," I answered. "I saw the man, under whose care she was, shot, and I

brought her here because she was friendless. I know no more about her."

"That," she said quietly, "is hard to believe."

"I have no interest in your belief or disbelief," I answered. "Pardon me if I add, madame, that I have no interest in the continuation of this conversation."

She rose at once.

"You are either a very brave man," she said, "or a very simple one. I shall await further instructions from Madame Richard."

She departed silently and without any leave-taking. We all three looked at one another.

"Now what in thunder did she mean by that!" Arthur exclaimed blankly.

"It appears to me," Mabane said, "that you went plot hunting with a vengeance, Arnold."

Arthur was walking restlessly up and down the room, his hands in his pockets, a discontented frown upon his smooth young face. He stopped suddenly in front of us.

"I don't know much about the law, you fellows," he said, "but it seems to me that any of these people who seem to want to take Isobel away from us have only to go before the court and establish some sort of a legal claim, and we should have to give her up."

"That is true enough," I admitted. "The strange part of it is, though, that no one seems inclined to take this course."

Arthur threw down a letter upon the table.

"This came for you yesterday, Arnold," he said. "I have n't opened it, of course, but you can see from

the name at the back of the envelope that it is from a firm of solicitors."

I took it up and opened it at once. I knew quite well what Arthur feared. This is what I read —

"17, LINCOLN'S INN, LONDON.

"DEAR SIR, —

"We beg to inform you that we have been instructed by a client, who desires to remain anonymous, to open for you at the London and Westminster Bank an account on your behalf as guardian of Miss Isobel de Sorrens, a young lady who, we understand, is at present in your care.

"The amount placed at our disposal is three hundred a year. We shall be happy to furnish you with cheque book and full authority to make use of this sum if you will favour us with a call, accompanied by the young lady, but we are not in a position to afford you any information whatever as to our client's identity.

"Trusting to have the pleasure of seeing you shortly,

"We are, yours truly,

"HAMILTON & PLACE."

I laid the letter on the table without a word. Mabane and Arthur in turn read it. Then there was an ominous silence. I think that we all had the same thought. It was Arthur, however, who expressed it.

"What beastly rot!" he exclaimed.

I turned to Mabane.

"I imagine," he said, "that we should not be justified in refusing this offer. At the same time, if anyone has the right to provide for the child, why do they not come forward and claim her?"

At that moment Isobel came in. I took up the letter and placed it in her hand.

"Isobel," I said, "we want you to read this."

She read it, and handed it back to me without a word. We were all watching her eagerly. She looked at me appealingly.

"Is it necessary," she asked, "for me to accept this money?"

"Tell us," I said, "exactly how you feel."

"I think," she said, "that if there is anyone from whom I have the right to accept all this money, I ought to know who they are. I do not want to be a burden upon anyone," she added hesitatingly, "but I would rather work every moment of the day — oh, I think that I would rather starve than touch this money, unless I know who it is that offers it."

I laughed as I tore the letter in half.

"Dear child," I said, resting my hand upon her shoulder, "that is what we all hoped that you would say!"

CHAPTER XII

LADY DELAHAYE sank down upon the couch against which I had been standing.

"Poor, bored man!" she exclaimed, with mock sympathy. "I ought to have asked some entertaining people, ought n't I? There is n't a soul here for you to talk to!"

"On the contrary," I answered, "there are a good many more people here than I expected to see. I understood that you were to be alone."

"And you probably think that I ought to be," she remarked. "Well, I never was conventional. You know that. I shut myself up for a month. Now I expect my friends to come and console me."

"It is not likely," I said, "that you will be disappointed."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Perhaps not. Those whom I do not want will come, of course. As for the others — well!"

She looked up at me. I sat down by her side.

"Ah! That is nice of you," she said softly. "I wanted to have a quiet talk. Tell me why you are looking so glum."

"I was not conscious of it," I answered. "To tell you the truth, I was wondering whether Isobel were not a little young to bring to a gathering of this description."

"My dear Arnold," she murmured, "there are only one or two of my particular friends here. The rest dropped in by accident. Isobel does not seem to me to be particularly out of place, and she is certainly enjoying herself."

The echoes of her light laugh reached us just then. Several men were standing over her chair. She was the centre of what seemed to be a very amusing conversation. Arthur was standing on the outskirts of the group, apparently a little dull.

"She enjoys herself always," I answered. "She is of that disposition. Still——"

She put her hands up to her ears.

"Come, I won't be lectured," she exclaimed. "Seriously, I wanted you here. I had something to say to you — something particular."

"Waiving the other matter, then," I said, "I am wholly at your service."

"I may be prolix," she said quietly. "Forgive me if I am, but I want you to understand me. I am beginning to see that I have adopted a wrong position with regard to a certain matter which we have discussed at your rooms and at Argueil. I want to reopen the subject from an entirely different point of view."

"You mean," I said, "the subject of Isobel?"

"Of course! The first time I came to see you," Lady Delahaye said, looking up at me with penitence in her blue eyes, "I was horrid. I am very, very sorry. I did not know then who Isobel was, and I was angry with everyone — with poor Will, with the child herself, and with you. You must forgive me! I was very much upset."

"I will never think of it again," I promised her.

"Then, again, at Argueil," she continued, "I adopted a wrong tone altogether. Yours was the more natural, the more human point of view. There are certain very grave reasons why the child would be very much better out of the world. A life of seclusion would, I believe, in the end, when she is able to understand, be the happiest for her. And yet — she ought to have her chance!"

"I am glad that you admit that," I murmured.

"Now I am going to ask you something," she went on. "You will not be angry with me, I am sure. Do you think that a girl of Isobel's age and appearance is in her proper place in bachelor quarters, living with three young men?"

"I do not," I admitted. "I look upon it as a most regrettable necessity. Still, you must not make it sound worse than it is. We have a housekeeper who is the very essence of respectability, and Isobel is under her care."

"I want to make it no longer a necessity," Lady Delahaye said, smiling. "I want to relieve you and your conscience at the same time of a very awkward incubus. Listen! This is what I propose. Let Isobel come to me for a year! I shall treat her as my own daughter. She will have plenty of amusement. There are the theatres, and no end of scratch entertainments where one can take a girl of her age who is too young for society. She will mix with young people of her own age, she will have every advantage which, to speak frankly, must be denied to her in her present position. At the end of that year I shall tell her her history. It is a sad and a miserable one. You may

as well know that now. She can then take her choice of the convent, or any other mode of life which between us we can make possible for her. And I am very much inclined to believe, Arnold, that she will choose the convent."

"Is there any real reason, Lady Delahaye?" I asked, "why you should not tell me now what you propose to tell Isobel in a year's time? There have been so many mysterious circumstances in connection with this affair that it is hard to come to any decision when one is ignorant of so much."

"There are reasons — grave reasons — why I can tell you nothing," she answered. "Indeed, I would like to, Arnold," she continued earnestly, "but my position is a very difficult one. I think that you might trust me a little."

"I am sure that you wish to do what is best," I said, a little awkwardly, "but you must see that my position also is a little difficult. I, too, am under a promise!"

Her eyes flashed indignantly.

"To the man who killed my husband! The man whom you are shielding!" she exclaimed indignantly. "I think that you might at least have the grace to leave him out of the conversation."

"I have never introduced him," I answered. "I do not wish to do so. As to shielding him, I have not the slightest idea as to his whereabouts. Be reasonable, Lady Delahaye. I ——"

"Reasonable," she interrupted. "That is what I want you to be! Ask yourself a plain question. Which is the more fitting place for her — my house, or your chambers?"

She pointed to Isobel, who was leaning back in her chair laughing heartily into the face of a young man who was bending over her. By chance she looked just then older even than her years, and Arthur's glum figure, too, in the background was suggestive.

"Your house, without a doubt," I answered gravely, "if it is the house of a friend."

Her satin slipper beat the ground impatiently. She looked at me with a frown upon her face.

"Do you believe, then," she asked, "that I am her enemy? Does my offer sound like it?"

"Indeed, no," I answered, rising. "I am going to give Isobel herself a chance of accepting or declining it."

I crossed the room. Isobel, seeing me come, rose at once.

"Is it time for us to go?" she asked.

"Not quite!" I answered. "Go and talk to Lady Delahaye for a few minutes. She has something to say to you."

Isobel made a little grimace, so slight that only I could notice it, and took my place upon the sofa. I talked for a few minutes with some of the men whom I knew, and then Arthur touched me on the arm.

"Can't we go, Arnold?" he exclaimed, a little peevishly. "I've never been so bored in all my life."

"We must wait for a few minutes," I answered. "Isobel is talking to Lady Delahaye."

"I don't know a soul here, and I'm dying for a cigarette."

I pointed through the curtain to the anteroom adjoining.

"You can smoke in there," I remarked. "I'll introduce you to Miss Ernston if you like, the girl who drives the big Panhard in the park. I heard her say that she was going in there to get one of Lady Delahaye's Russian cigarettes!"

Arthur shook his head. He was covertly watching Isobel, sitting on the sofa.

"I'll go in and have the cigarette," he said, "but, Arnold, there's no fresh move on, is there? You're looking pretty glum!"

I shook my head.

"No, there is nothing exactly fresh," I answered. "Come along and smoke, will you! I want Lady Delahaye and Isobel to have their talk out."

He followed me reluctantly into the smaller of Lady Delahaye's reception-rooms, where we smoked for a few minutes in silence. Then Mabel Ernston stopped to speak to me for a moment, and I introduced Arthur. I left them talking motors, and stepped back into the other room. Isobel had already risen to her feet, and Lady Delahaye was looking at her curiously as though uncertain how far she had been successful. She saw me enter, and beckoned me to approach.

"I think that Isobel is tired," she said, in a tone which was meant to be kind. "She has promised to come and see me again."

Isobel looked at me. Her mouth, which a few minutes before had been curved with smiles, was straight now, and resolutely set. She was distinctly paler, and her manner seemed to have acquired a

new gravity. I must confess that my first impulse was one of relief. Isobel had not found Lady Delahaye's offer, then, so wonderfully attractive.

"Do you mind coming home now, Arnold?" she asked. "I did not know that it was so late."

I saw Lady Delahaye's face darken at her simple use of my Christian name, and the touch of her fingers upon my arm. Arthur heard our voices, and came to us at once. So we took leave of our hostess, and turned homewards.

For a long time we walked almost in silence. Then Isobel turned towards me with a new gravity in her face, and an unusual hesitation in her tone.

"Arnold," she said, "Lady Delahaye has been pointing out to me one or two things which I had not thought of before. I suppose she meant to be kind. I suppose it is right that I should know. But——" her voice trembled—"I wish she had not told me."

"Lady Delahaye is an interfering old cat!" Arthur exclaimed viciously. "Don't take any notice of her, Isobel."

"But I must know," she answered, "whether the things which she said were true."

"They were probably exaggerations," I said cheerfully; "but let us hear them, at any rate."

"She said," Isobel continued, looking steadily in front of her, "that you were all three very poor indeed, and that I had no right to come and live with you, and make you poorer still, when I had a home offered me elsewhere. She said that I should disturb your whole life, that you would have to give up many things which were a pleasure to you, and

you would not be able to succeed so well with your work, as you would have to write altogether for money. And she said that I should be grown up soon, and ought to live where there are women; and when I told her about Mrs. Burdett she laughed unpleasantly, and said that she did not count at all. And that is why — she wants me — to go there!"

Again the shadow of tragedy gleamed in the child's white face. Her face was strained, her eyes had lost the deep softness of their colouring, and there lurked once more in their depths the terror of nameless things. To me the sight of her like this was so piteous that I wasted not a moment in endeavouring to reassure her.

"Rubbish!" I exclaimed cheerfully. "Sheer and unadulterated rubbish! We are not rich, Isobel, but the trifle the care of you will cost us amounts to nothing at all. We are willing and able to take charge of you as well as we can. You know that!"

Ah! She drew a long sigh of relief. It was wonderful how her face changed.

"But why is Lady Delahaye so cruel — why is she so anxious that I should not stay with you?" she said.

I laughed.

"Lady Delahaye is mysterious," I answered. "I have come to the conclusion, Isobel, that you must be a princess in disguise, and that Lady Delahaye wants to claim all the rewards for having taken charge of you!"

"Don't be silly!" she laughed. "Princesses are not brought up at Madame Richard's, without relations or friends to visit them, and no pocket money."

"Nevertheless," I answered, "when I consider the number of people who are interested in you, and Lady Delahaye's extraordinary persistence, I am inclined to stick to my theory. We shall look upon you, Isobel, as an investment, and some day you shall reward us all."

Her hand slipped into mine. Her eyes were soft enough now.

"Dear friend," she murmured, "I think that it is my heart only which will reward you — my great, great gratitude. I am afraid of Lady Delahaye, Arnold. There are things in her eyes when she looks at me which make me shiver. Do not let us go there again, please!"

Arthur broke in impetuously.

"You shall go nowhere you don't want to, Isobel. Arnold and I will see to that."

"And — about the other thing — she mentioned," Isobel began.

"She was right and wrong," I answered. "Of course, it would be better for you if one of us had a sister or a mother living with us, but Mrs. Burdett has always seemed to us like a mother, and I think — that it will be all right," I concluded a little lamely. "We need not worry about that, at present at any rate. Come, we 've had a dull afternoon, and I sold a story yesterday. Let 's go to Fasolas, and have a half-crown dinner."

"I 'm on," Arthur declared. "We 'll go and fetch Allan."

"You dear!" Isobel exclaimed. "I shall wear my new hat!"

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Book II

CHAPTER I

"I HAVE no doubt," Mabane said gloomily, "that Arthur is right. He ought to know more about it than old fogies like you and me, Arnold. We had the money, and we ought to have insisted upon it. You gave way far too easily."

"That 's all very well," I protested, "but I don't take in a woman's fashion paper, and Isobel assured us that the hat was all right. She looks well enough in it, surely!"

"Isobel looks ripping!" Arthur declared, "but then, she looks ripping in anything. All the same, the hat 's old-fashioned. You look at the hats those girls are wearing, who 've just come in — flat, bunchy things, with flowers under the brim. That 's the style just now."

"Isobel shall have one, then," I declared. "We will take her West to-morrow. We can afford it very well."

She came up to us beaming. She was a year older, and her skirts were a foot longer. Her figure was, perhaps, a shade more developed, and her manner a little more assured. In other respects she was unchanged.

"What are you two old dears worrying about?" she exclaimed lightly. "You have the air of conspirators. No secrets from me, please. What is it all about?"

"We are lamenting the antiquity of your hat," Mabane answered gravely. "Arthur assures us that it is out of date. It ought to be flat and bunchy, and it is n't!"

"Geese!" she exclaimed lightly, "both of you! Arthur, I 'm ashamed of you. You may know something about motors, but you are very ignorant indeed about hats. Come along, all of you, and gaze at my miniatures. I am longing to see how they look framed."

"As regards the hat ——" I began.

"I will not hear anything more about it," she interrupted, laughing. "Of course, if you don't like to be seen with me — oh! Why, look! look!"

We had stopped before a case of miniatures. In the front row were two somewhat larger than the others, and Isobel's first serious attempts. Behind each was stuck a little ivory board bearing the magic word "Sold."

"Sold!" Arthur exclaimed incredulously.

"It may be a mistake," I said slowly.

Mabane and I exchanged glances. We knew very well that, though the miniatures showed promise of talent, they were amateurish and imperfect, and the reserve which we had placed upon them was quite out of all proportion to their merit. It must surely be a mistake! We followed Isobel across the room. A little elderly gentleman was sitting before a desk, engaged in the leisurely contemplation of a small open ledger. Isobel had halted in front of him. There was a delicate flush of pink on her cheeks, and her eyes were brilliant.

"Are my miniatures sold, please?" she exclaimed.

"My name is Miss de Sorrens. They have a small ivory board just behind them which says 'Sold.'"

The elderly gentleman looked up, and surveyed her calmly over the top of his spectacles.

"What did you say that your name was, madam, and the number of your miniatures?" he enquired.

"Miss Isobel de Sorrens," she answered breathlessly, "and my miniatures are number two hundred and seven and eight — a portrait of an elderly lady, and two hundred and eighty-nine — a child."

The little old gentleman turned over the pages of his ledger in very leisurely fashion, and consulted a recent entry.

"Your miniatures are sold, Miss de Sorrens," he said, "for the reserve price placed upon them — twenty guineas each. The money will be paid to you on the close of the Exhibition, according to our usual custom."

"Please tell me who bought them," she begged. "I want to be quite sure that there is no mistake."

"There is certainly no mistake," he answered, smiling. "The first one was bought by — let me see — a nobleman in the suite of the Archduchess of Bristlaw, the Baron von Leibingen. I believe that her Highness is proposing to visit the Exhibition this afternoon. The other purchaser paid cash, but refused his name. Ah! Excuse me!"

He rose hastily, and moved towards the door. A little group of people were entering, before whom the bystanders gave way with all that respect which the British public invariably displays for Royalty.

Isobel watched them with frank and eager interest. Mabane and I moved over to her side.

"Is it true?" I asked her.

"He says so," she answered, still a little bewildered. "Arnold, can you imagine it? Forty guineas! I — I ——"

There followed an amazing interlude. The little party of newcomers, before whom everyone was obsequiously giving way, came face to face with us. Mabane and I stepped back at once, but Isobel remained motionless. An extraordinary change had come over her. Her eyes seemed fastened upon the woman who was the central figure of the little procession, and the girl who walked by her side. Someone whispered to her to move back. She took no notice. She seemed as though she had not heard. Royalty raised its lorgnettes, and dropped them with a crash upon the polished wood floor. Then those who were quick to understand knew that something lay beneath this unusual awkwardness.

The manager of the Gallery, who, catalogue in hand, had been prepared personally to conduct the Royal party round, looked about him, wondering as to the cause of the *contretemps*. His eyes fell upon Isobel.

"Please step back," he whispered to her, angrily. "Don't you see that the Princess is here, and the Archduchess of Bristlaw? Clear the way, please!"

The manager was a small man, and Isobel's eyes travelled over his head. She did not seem to hear him speak. The Archduchess recovered herself. She took the shattered lorgnettes from the hand of her lady-in-waiting. She pointed to Isobel.

"Who is this young person?" she asked calmly. "Does she wish to speak to me?"

A wave of colour swept into Isobel's cheeks. She drew back at once.

"I beg your pardon, Madame," she said. But even when she had rejoined my side her eyes remained fixed upon the face of the Archduchess and her companion.

There was a general movement forward. One of the ladies in the suite, however, lingered behind. Our eyes met, and Lady Delahaye held out her hand.

"Your ward is growing," she murmured, "in inches, if not in manners. When are you going to engage a chaperon for her?"

"When I think it necessary, Lady Delahaye," I answered, with a bow.

"You artists have — such strange ideas," she remarked, smiling up at me. "You wish Isobel to remain a child of nature, perhaps. Yet you must admit that a few lessons in deportment would be of advantage."

"To the Archduchess, apparently," I answered. "One does not often see a great lady so embarrassed."

Lady Delahaye shrugged her shoulders. She dropped her voice a little.

"Are we never to meet without quarrelling, Arnold?" she whispered, looking up into my eyes. "It used not to be like this."

"Lady Delahaye," I said, "it is not my fault. We seem to have taken opposite sides in a game which I for one do not understand. Twice during

the last six months you have made attempts which can scarcely be called honourable to take Isobel from us. Our rooms are continually watched. We dare not let the child go out alone. Now this woman from Madame Richard's has come to live in the same building. She, too, watches."

"It is only the beginning, Arnold," she said quietly. "I told you more than a year ago that you were interfering in graver concerns than you imagined. Why don't you be wise, and let the child go? The care of her will bring nothing but trouble upon you!"

Her words struck home more surely than she imagined, for in my heart had lain dormant for months the fear of what was to come, the shadow which was already creeping over our lives. Nevertheless, I answered her lightly.

"You know my obstinacy of old, Lady Delahaye," I said. "We are wasting words, I think."

She shrugged her shoulders and passed on. Mabane touched me on the shoulder.

"Isobel would like to go," he said. "Arthur and she are at the door already."

I turned to leave the place. We were already in the passage which led into Bond Street, when I felt myself touched upon the shoulder. A tall, fair young man, with his hair brushed back, and very blue eyes, who had been in the suite of the Archduchess, addressed me.

"Pardon me," he said, "but you are Mr. Arnold Greatson, I believe?"

I acknowledged the fact.

"The Archduchess of Bristlaw begs that you will

spare her a moment. She will not detain you longer."

I turned to Mabane.

"Take Isobel home," I said. "I will follow presently."

We re-entered the Gallery. The majority of the Royal party were busy examining the miniatures. The Archduchess was talking earnestly to Lady Delahaye in a remote corner. My guide led me directly to her.

"Her Highness permits me to present you," he said to me. "This is Mr. Arnold Greatson, your Highness."

The Archduchess acknowledged my bow graciously.

"You are the Mr. Arnold Greatson who writes such charming stories," she said. "Yes, it is so, is it not?"

"Your Highness is very kind," I answered.

"I learn," she continued, "that you are also the guardian of the young lady who gave us all such a start. Pardon me, but you surely seem a little young for such a post."

"The circumstances, your Highness," I answered, "were a little exceptional."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, yes, so I have heard. Lady Delahaye has been telling me the story. I understand that you have never been able to discover the child's parentage. That is very strange!"

"There are other things in connection with my ward, your Highness," I said, "which seem to me equally inexplicable."

"Yes? I am very interested. Will you tell me what they are?"

"By all means," I answered. "I refer to the fact that though no one has come forward openly to claim the child, indirect efforts to induce her to leave us are continually being made by persons who seem to desire anonymity. Whenever she has been alone in the streets she has been accosted under various pretexts."

The Archduchess was politely surprised.

"But surely you are aware," she remarked, "of the source of some at least of these attempts?"

"Madame Richard," I said, "the principal of the convent where Isobel was educated, seems particularly anxious to have her return there."

The Archduchess nodded her head slowly.

"Well," she said, "is that so much to be wondered at? Even we who are of the world might consider — you must pardon me, Mr. Greatson, if I speak frankly — the girl's present position an undesirable one. How do you suppose, then, that the principal of a convent boarding-school, whose sister, I believe, is a nun, would be likely to regard the same thing?"

"Your Highness knows, then, of the convent?" I remarked.

The Archduchess lifted her eyebrows lightly. Her gesture seemed intended to convey to me the fact that she had not sent for me to answer my questions. I remained unabashed, however, and waited for her reply. Several curious facts were beginning to group themselves together in my mind.

"I have heard of the place," she said coldly. "I

believe it to be an excellent institution. I sent for you, Mr. Greatson, not, however, to discuss such matters, but solely to ask for information as to the child's parentage. It seems that you are unable to give me this."

"Lady Delahaye knows as much — probably more — than I," I answered.

It seemed to me that the Archduchess and Lady Delahaye exchanged quick glances. I affected, however, to have noticed nothing.

"I will be quite candid with you, Mr. Greatson," the Archduchess continued. "My interest in the girl arises, of course, from the wonderful likeness to my own daughter, and to other members of my family. Your ward herself was obviously struck with it. I must confess that I, too, received something of a shock."

"I think," I answered, "that it was apparent to all of us."

The Archduchess coughed. For a Royal personage, she seemed to find some little difficulty in proceeding.

"The history of our family is naturally a matter of common knowledge," she said slowly. "Any connection with it, therefore, which this child might be able to claim would be of that order which you, as a man of the world, would doubtless understand. Nevertheless, I am sufficiently interested in her to be inclined to take any steps which might be necessary for her welfare. I propose to set some enquiries on foot. Providing that the result of them be as I suspect, I presume you would have no objection to relinquish the child to my protection?"

"Your Highness," I answered, "I could not answer such a question as that without consideration, or without consulting Isobel herself."

The Archduchess frowned upon me, and I was at once made conscious that I had fallen under her displeasure. I fancy, however, that I appeared as I felt, quite unimpressed.

"I cannot understand any hesitation whatsoever upon your part, Mr. Greatson," she said. "Under my care the child's future would be fittingly provided for. Her position with you must be, at the best, an equivocal one."

"Your Highness," I answered steadily, "my friends and I are handicapped perhaps by our sex, but we have a housekeeper who is an old family servant, and a model of respectability. In all ways and at all times we have treated Isobel as a very dear sister. The position may seem an equivocal one — to a certain order of minds. Those who know us, I may venture to say, see nothing harmful to the child in our guardianship."

The Archduchess stared at me, and I gathered that she was not used to anything save implicit obedience from those to whom she made suggestions. She stared, and then she laughed softly. There was more than a spice of malice in her mirth.

"Which of you three young men are going to fall in love with her?" she asked bluntly. "You call her a child, but she is almost a woman, and she is beautiful. She will be very beautiful."

"Your Highness," I answered coldly, "it is a matter which we have not as yet permitted ourselves to consider."

The Archduchess was displeased with me, and she took no further pains to hide her displeasure.

"Mr. Greatson," she said, with a little wave of dismissal, "for the present I have no more to say."

She turned her back upon me, and I at once left the Gallery.

CHAPTER II

I WALKED home with but one thought in my mind. The Archduchess had put into words — very plain, blunt words — what as yet I had scarcely dared harbour in my mind as a fugitive idea. She had done me in that respect good service. She had brought to a sudden crisis an issue which it was folly any longer to evade. I meant to speak now, and have done with it. I walked through the busy streets a dreaming man. It was for the last time. Henceforth, even the dream must pass.

I found Mabane and Arthur alone, for which I was sufficiently thankful. There was no longer any excuse for delay. Mabane had taken possession of the easy-chair, and was smoking his largest pipe. Arthur was walking restlessly up and down the room. Evidently they had been discussing between them the events of the afternoon, for there was a sudden silence when I entered, and they both waited eagerly for me to speak. I closed the door carefully behind me, and took a cigarette from the box on my desk.

"What did the Archduchess want?" Arthur asked bluntly.

"I will tell you all that she said presently," I answered. "In effect, it was the same as the others. She, too, wanted Isobel!"

"Shall we have to give her up?" Arthur demanded.

"We will discuss that another time," I said. "I am glad to find that you are both here. There is another matter, concerning which I think that we ought to come to an understanding as soon as possible. It has been in my mind for a long while."

"About Isobel?" Arthur interrupted.

"About Isobel!" I assented.

They were both attentive. Mabane's expression was purely negative. Arthur, on the other hand, was distinctly nervous. I think that from the first he had some idea what it was that I wanted to say.

"Isobel, when she came to us little more than a year ago," I continued, "was a child. We have always treated her, and I believe thought of her, as a child. It was perhaps a daring experiment to have brought her here at all, and yet I am inclined to think that, under the circumstances, it was the best thing for her, and, from another point of view, an excellent thing for us!"

"Excellent! Why, it has made all the difference in the world," Arthur declared vigorously.

"I see that you follow me," I agreed. "Her coming seems to have steadied us up all round. The changes which we were obliged to make in our manner of living have all been for the better. I am afraid that we were drifting, Allan and I, at any rate into a somewhat objectless sort of existence, and our work was beginning to show the signs of it. The coming of Isobel seems to have changed all that. You, Allan, know that you have never done better work in your life than during the last year. Your portrait of her was an inspiration. Some of those smaller studies show signs of a talent which I think

has surprised everyone, except Arthur and myself, who knew what you could do when you settled down to it. I, too, have been more successful, as you know. I have done better work, and more of it. You agree with me so far, Allan?"

"There is no doubt at all about it," Mabane said slowly. "There has been a different atmosphere about the place since the child came, and we have thrived in it. We are all better, much the better, for her coming!"

"I am glad that you appreciate this, Allan," I said. "This sort of thing is rather hard to put into words, but I believe that you fellows understand exactly what I mean. We have had to amuse her, and in doing so we have developed simpler and better tastes for ourselves. We 've had to give up a lot of things, and a lot of friends we 've been much better without."

"It 's true, every word of it, Arnold," Mabane admitted, knocking out the ashes from his pipe. "We 've chucked the music-halls for the theatres, and our lazy slacking Sundays, with a night at the club afterwards, for long wholesome days in the country — very jolly days, too. We 're better men in our small way for the child's coming, Arnold. You can take that for granted. Now, go on with what you have to say. I suppose this is all a prelude to something or other."

Even then I hesitated, for my task was not an easy one, and all the while Arthur, who maintained an uneasy silence, was watching me furtively. It was as though he knew from the first what it was that I was leading up to, and I seemed to be conscious already of his passionate though unspoken resistance.

"It was a child," I said at last, "whom we took into our lives. To-day she is a woman!"

Then Arthur could keep silence no longer. There was a pink flush in his cheeks, which were still as smooth as a girl's, but the passion in his tone was the passion of a man.

"You are not thinking, Arnold — you would not be so mad as to think of giving her up to any of these people?" he exclaimed. "They are her enemies, all of them. I am sure of it!"

"I am coming to that presently," I went on. "You know what happened this afternoon? You saw the likeness, the amazing likeness, between Isobel and that other girl, the daughter of the Archduchess. The Archduchess was herself very much impressed with it. Without a doubt she knows Isobel's history. She went so far as to tell me that she believed Isobel to be morganatically connected with her own family, the House of Waldenburg! She offered to take her under her own protection!"

"You did not consent!" Arthur exclaimed.

"I neither consented nor absolutely refused," I answered. "It was not a matter to be decided on the spur of the moment. But the more I think of it, the more I am puzzled. Madame Richard wants Isobel. She was not satisfied with our refusal to give her up. She sent that messenger of hers back with fresh offers, and when again we refused, the woman takes up her quarters here, always spying upon us, always accosting Isobel on any excuse. Madame Richard may be a very good woman, but I have seen and spoken with her, and I do not for one moment believe that her extraordinary persist-

ence is for Isobel's sake alone. Then Lady Delahaye has never ceased from worrying us. She has tried threats, persuasions and entreaties. She has tried by every means in her power to induce us to give up the child to her. And now we have the Archduchess to deal with, and it seems to me that we are getting very near the heart of the matter. The Archduchess is a daughter of one of the Royal Houses of Europe, and Major Delahaye was once *attaché* at her father's Court. Then there is Grooten, the man who shot Delahaye. His interest in her is so strong that he risks his life and commits a crime to save her from a man whom he believes to be a source of danger to her. He sends her money every quarter, which, as you know, we have never touched — it stands in her name if ever she should require it. Grooten is a man into whose charge we could not possibly give her, and yet of all these people he is the only one whom I would trust — the only one whom I feel instinctively means well by her. Madame Richard wants her, Lady Delahaye wants her, and behind them both there is the Archduchess, who also wants her. I have thought this matter over, and, so far as I am concerned, I have decided ——"

"Not to give her up to any of them!" Arthur exclaimed sharply.

"To give her up to no one who is not prepared to go into court and establish a legal claim," I continued. "It is very simple, and I think very reasonable. When she leaves us, it shall be to take up an accredited and definite station in life. The time may come at any moment. We must always be prepared for it. But until it does, we will not even parley any

longer with these people who come to us and hint at mysterious things."

Arthur wrung my hand. He was apparently much relieved, and he did not know what was coming.

"Arnold, you are a brick!" he exclaimed. "That 's sound common-sense — every word you 've uttered. Let them prove their claim to her."

"I agree with every word you have spoken," Allan said quietly, in response to a look from me. "The child is at least safe with us, and she is not wasting her time. She has talent, and she has application. I, for my part, shall be very sorry indeed when the time comes, as I suppose it will come some day, for her to go."

Then I mustered up my courage, and said that which I had known from the first would be difficult.

"There is one thing more," I said, "and I want to say it to you now. It may seem to you both unnecessary. Perhaps it is. Still, it is better that we should come to an understanding about it. A year has passed since Isobel, the child, came to us. To-day she is a woman. If we still keep her with us there must be a bond, a covenant between us, and our honour must stand pledged to keep it. I think that you both know very well what I mean. I hope that you will both agree with me."

I paused for a moment, but I received no encouragement from either of them. They were both silent, and Arthur's eyes were questioning mine fiercely. I addressed myself more particularly to him.

"Allan and I are elderly persons compared with you, Arthur," I said, "but we might still be described at a stretch as young men. If we decide to remain

Isobel's guardians, there is a further and a deeper duty devolving upon us than the obvious one of treating her with all respect. It is possible that she might come to feel a preference for one of us — a sense of gratitude, the natural sentiment of her coming womanhood, even the fact of continual propinquity might encourage it. Isobel is charming; she will be beautiful. The position, if any one of us relaxed in the slightest degree, might become critical. You must understand what I mean, I am sure, even if I am not expressing it very clearly. Isobel sees few, if any, other men. It is possible, it is almost certain, that she belongs to a class whose position and ideas are far removed from ours. There must be no sentimental relations established between her and any one of us. We are her brothers, she is our sister. So it must remain while she is under our charge. This must be agreed upon between us."

There was a dead, almost an ominous, silence. Mabane was standing with his arms folded, and his face turned a little away. I appealed first to him.

"Allan," I said, "you agree with me?"

"Absolutely!" he answered. "I agree with every word you have said."

I turned to Arthur.

"And you, Arthur?"

He did not at once reply. The colour was coming and going in his cheeks, and he was playing nervously with his watchchain. When he raised his eyes to mine, the slight belligerency of his earlier manner was more clearly defined.

"I think," he said, "that there is another side to the question. Isobel is the sort of girl whom fellows

are bound to notice. Besides, being so jolly good-looking, she is such ripping good form, and that sort of thing. What you are proposing, Arnold, is simply that we should stand on one side altogether and leave Isobel for any other fellow who happens to come along."

"It scarcely amounts to that," I answered. "No other man is likely to see much of her while she is under our care. Afterwards, of course, the conditions are different. Our covenant, the covenant to which I am asking you to agree, comes to an end when she leaves us."

"You see," Arthur protested, "it is a little different, is n't it, for you fellows? Not that I 'm comparing myself with you, of course, in any sort of way. You 're both heaps cleverer than I am, and all that, but Isobel and I are nearer the same age, and we 've been about together such a lot, motoring and all that, and had such good times. You understand what I mean, don't you? Of course, that sort of thing, that sort of thing — you know, brings a fellow and a girl together so, liking the same things, and being about the same age. It is n't quite like that with you two, is it now?"

Again there was silence. Mabane had withdrawn his pipe from his mouth, and was looking steadfastly into the bowl. As for me, I found it wholly impossible to analyse my sensations. All the time Arthur was looking eagerly from one to the other of us. I recovered myself with an effort, and answered him.

"We will not dispute the position with you, Arthur," I said quietly. "We will admit all that

you say. We will admit, therefore, that by all natural laws you are the one on whom the burden of keeping this covenant must fall most heavily. That fact may make it a little harder for you than for us, but it does not alter the position in any way. There must be no attempt at sentiment between Isobel and any one of us. If by any chance the opening should come from her, it must be ignored and discouraged."

"I can't for the life of me see why," Arthur declared. "And I — well, it's no use beating about the bush. Isobel is the only girl in the world I could ever look at. I am fond of her! I can't help it! I love her! There!"

Mabane mercifully took up the burden of speech.

"Have you said anything to her?" he asked.

"No."

"Not a word?"

"Not a word," Arthur declared. "She is too young. She has not begun to think about those things yet. But she is wonderful, and I love her. It is all very well for you two," he continued earnestly. "You are both over thirty, and confirmed bachelors. I'm only just twenty-four, and I've never cared for a girl a snap of the fingers yet. I don't care any more about knocking about. Of course, I've done a bit at it like everyone else, but Isobel has knocked all that out of me. I should be quite content to settle down to-morrow!"

I tried to put myself in his place, to enter for a moment into his point of view. Yet I am afraid that I must have seemed very unsympathetic.

"Arthur," I said, "I am sorry for you, but it won't do. I fancy that before long she will be

removed from us altogether. For her sake, and the sake of our own honour, no word of what you have told us must pass your lips. Unless you can promise that ——"

I hesitated. Arthur had risen to his feet. The colour had mounted to his temples, his eyes were bright with anger.

"I will not promise it," he declared. "I love Isobel, and very soon I mean to tell her so."

"Then it must be under another roof," I answered. "If you will not promise to keep absolutely silent until we at least know exactly what her parentage is, you must leave us."

Arthur took up his hat.

"Very well," he said shortly. "I will send for my things to-morrow."

He left the room without another word to either of us.

CHAPTER III

"IN diplomacy," the Baron remarked blandly, "as also, I believe, in affairs of commerce, the dinner-table is frequently chosen as a fitting place for the commencement of delicate negotiations. For a bargain — no! But when three men — take ourselves, for instance — have a matter of some importance to discuss, I can conceive no better opportunity for the preliminary — skirmishing, shall I say? — than the present."

I raised my glass, and looked thoughtfully at the pale amber wine bubbling up from the stem.

"From a certain point of view," I answered, "I entirely agree with you. Yet you must remember that the host has always the advantage."

"In the present case," the Baron said with a smile, "that amounts to nothing, for you practically gave me my answer before we sat down to dinner. If I am able to induce you to change your mind — well, so much the better. If not — well, I can have nothing to complain of."

"I am glad," I answered, "that you appreciate our position. With regard to the present custody of the child, which I take it is what you want to discuss with us, our minds are practically made up. My friend and I have both agreed that we will continue

the charge of her until she is claimed by someone who is in a position to do so openly — someone, in short, who has a legal right."

The Baron nodded gravely.

"An excellent decision," he said. "No one could possibly quarrel with it. Yet it is a privilege to be able to tell you some facts which may perhaps affect your point of view. I can explain to you *why* this open claim is not made."

"We are here," I answered, "to listen to whatever you may have to say."

We — Allan and I — were dining with the Baron at Claridge's. An appointment, which he had begged us to make, had been changed into a dinner invitation at his earnest request. There was a likelihood, he told us, of his being summoned abroad at any moment, and he was particularly anxious not to leave the hotel pending the arrival of a cablegram. So far his demeanour had been courtesy and consideration itself, but under the man's geniality and almost excessive *bonhomie* both Allan and myself were conscious of a certain nervous impatience, only partially concealed. Whatever proposal he might have to make to us, our acceptance of it was without doubt a matter of great importance to him. The more we realized this, the more we wondered.

"I only wish," he said with emphasis, "that it was within my power to lay the cards upon the table before you, to tell you the whole truth. I do not think then that you would hesitate for a single second. But that I cannot do. The honour of a great house, Mr. Greatson, is involved in this matter, into which you have been so strangely drawn. I

must leave blanks in my story which you must fill in for yourselves, you and Mr. Mabane. There are things which I may not — dare not — tell you. If I could, you would wonder no longer that those who desire to take over the charge of the child wish to do so without publicity, and without any appeal to the courts."

"The Archduchess," I remarked, "gave me some hint as to the nature of these difficulties."

The Baron emptied his glass and called for another bottle of wine. Then he looked carefully around him, a quite unnecessary precaution, for our table was in a remote corner of the room, and there were very few dining.

"It is no longer," he said, "a matter of surmise with us as to who the child you call Isobel de Sorrens really is. She is of the House of Waldenburg. She carries her descent written in her face, a hall-mark no one could deny. Upon the Archduchess and others of her great family must rest always the shadow of a grave stigma so long as the child remains in the hands of strangers, an alien from her own country. The Archduchess wishes at once, and quietly, to assume the charge of her. She is conscious of your services; she feels that you have probably saved the child from a fate which it is not easy to contemplate calmly. She authorizes me, therefore, to treat with you in the most generous fashion."

"That is a phrase," I remarked, "which I do not altogether understand."

"Later," the Baron said, with a meaning look, "I will make myself clear. In the meantime, let

me recommend this soufflé. Mr. Mabane, you are drinking nothing. Would you prefer your wine a shade colder?"

"Not for me," Allan declared. "I prefer champagne at its natural temperature; the wine is far too good to have its flavour frozen out of it. Apropos of what you were saying, Baron, there is one question which I should like to ask you. Why was Major Delahaye sent to St. Argueil for Isobel, and what was he supposed to do with her?"

I do not think that the Baron liked the question. He hesitated for several moments before he answered it.

"Major Delahaye was not sent," he said. "He went on his own account. He was the only person who knew the child's whereabouts."

"And what do you suppose his object was in bringing her away from the convent?" Allan persisted.

"I do not know," the Baron answered. "All I can say is that it pleases me vastly more to find the child in your keeping than in his."

"Was the man who shot him," I asked, "concerned in the child's earlier history?"

"I cannot place him at all," the Baron answered. "I should imagine that his quarrel with Major Delahaye was a personal one, and had no bearing upon the child. Few men had more enemies than Delahaye. One does not wish to speak ill of the dead, but he was a bully and a brute all his days."

A servant in plain black livery brought a sealed note to our host, and stood respectfully by his side

while he read it. It obviously consisted of but a few words, yet the Baron continued to hold it in front of him for nearly a minute. Finally, he crushed it in his hand, and dismissed the servant.

"There is no answer," he said. "I shall wait upon her Highness in an hour."

Our dinner was over. Both Mabane and myself had declined dessert. Our host rose.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have ordered coffee in the smoking-room. The head-waiter has told me of some wonderful brandy, and I have some cigars which I am anxious for you to try. Will you come this way?"

We were the only occupants of the smoking-room. The Baron appropriated a corner, and left us to fetch the cigars. Mabane lit a cigarette and leaned back in an easy-chair.

"It seems to me, Arnold," he said, "that you are like the man who found what he went out for to see. You wanted tragedy — and you came very near it. I do not quite see what the end of all these things will be. Our host ——"

"There is a disappointment in store for him, I fancy," I interrupted. "He is a very faithful servant of the Archduchess, and he has worked hard for her. From his point of view his arguments are reasonable enough. All that he says is plausible — and yet — one feels that there is something behind it all. Allan, I don't trust one of these people! I can't!"

"Nor I," Allan answered softly, for the Baron had already entered the room.

He brought with him some wonderful cabanas,

and immediately afterwards coffee and liqueurs were served. The moment the waiter had disappeared, he threw off all reserve.

"Come," he said, "I am no longer your host. We meet here on equal terms. I have an offer to make to you which I think you will find astonishing. The fact is, her Highness is anxious to run no risk of any resurrection of a certain scandal. She has commissioned me to beg your acceptance — you and your friend — of these," he laid down two separate pieces of paper upon the table. "She wishes to relieve you as soon as possible to-night, if you can arrange it — of the care of a certain young lady. There need be no hesitation about your acceptance. Royalty, as you know, has special privileges so far as regards bounty, and her Highness appreciates most heartily the care and kindness which the child has received at your hands."

I stared at my piece of paper. It was a cheque for five thousand pounds. I looked at Mabane's. It was a cheque for a like amount. Then I looked up at the Baron. The perspiration was standing out upon his forehead. He was watching us as a man might watch one in whose hands lay the power of life or death. I resisted my first impulse, which was simply to tear the cheque in two. I simply pushed it back across the table.

"Baron," I said, "if this is meant as a recompense for any kindness which we have shown to a friendless child, it is unnecessary and unacceptable. If it is meant," I added more slowly, "for a bribe, it is not enough."

"Call it what you will," he answered quickly.

"Name your own price for the child — brought here — to-night."

"No price that you or your mistress could pay, Baron," I answered quietly. "I told you my ultimatum two hours ago. The child remains with us until she is claimed by one who has a legal right, and is not afraid to invoke the law."

"But I have explained the position," the Baron protested. "You must understand why we cannot bring such a matter as this into the courts."

"Your story is ingenious, and, pardon me, it may be true," I answered. "We require proof!"

The Baron's face was not pleasant to look upon.

"You doubt my word, sir — my word, and the word of the Archduchess?"

I rose to my feet. Mabane followed my example. I felt that a storm was pending.

"Baron," I said, "there are some causes which make strange demands upon the best of us. A man may lie to save a woman's honour, or, if he be a politician, for the good of his country. I cannot discuss this matter any further with you. My sole regret is that we ever discussed it at all. My friend and I must wish you good-night."

"By heavens, you shall not go!" the Baron exclaimed. "What right have you to the child? None at all! Her Highness wishes to be generous. It pleases you to flout her generosity. Mr. Arnold Greatson, you are a fool! Don't you see that you are a pigmy, who has stolen through the back door into the world where great things are dealt with? You have no place there. You cannot keep the child

away from us. You have no influence, no money. You are nobody. If you think ——"

Mabane interposed.

"Baron," he said, "if you were not still, in a sense, our host, I should knock you down. As it is, permit me to tell you that you are talking nonsense."

The Baron drew a sharp, quick breath.

"You are right," he said shortly. "I am a fool to discuss this with you at all. It is not worth while. The Archduchess, out of kindness, would have treated you as friends. You decline! Good! You shall be treated — as you deserve."

The Baron threw open the door and bowed us out. The commissionaire helped us on with our coats and summoned a hansom. We were just driving off, when a man in a long travelling coat, who had been standing outside the swing-door of the hotel, calmly swung himself up into the cab and motioned to us to make room. I stared at him in blank amazement.

"Hullo!" I exclaimed. "What ——"

"It is I, my friend," Mr. Grooten answered calmly. "Tell the man to drive to your rooms."

CHAPTER IV.

"I AM staying at Claridge's, or rather I was," Mr. Grooten remarked, as we turned into Brook Street. "I saw you with Leibingen, and I have been waiting for you. We will talk, I think, at your rooms."

Whereupon he lit a fresh cigarette, and did not speak a word until we had reached our destination. Isobel had gone to bed, and our sitting-room was empty. I turned up the lamp, and pushed a chair towards him. In various small ways he seemed to have succeeded in effecting a wonderful change in his appearance. His hair was differently arranged, and much greyer. His face was pale and drawn as though with illness. But for his voice and his broad, humorous mouth I doubt whether I should immediately have recognized him.

"I perceive," he said, "that I am not forgotten. It is very flattering! My friends abroad tell me that I have altered a good deal during the last twelve months."

"You have altered, without a doubt," I admitted. "But the circumstances connected with our first meeting were scarcely such as tend towards forgetfulness. You remember my friend, Mr. Allan Mabane?"

"Perfectly," he assented, with a courteous little wave of the hand. "I am very glad to have come

across you both again so opportunely. I only arrived in England a few days ago, but I did not hope to have this pleasure until the morning at the earliest. You expected to have heard from me, perhaps, before."

"I don't know about that," I answered, "but I can assure you that we are both very glad to see you, for more reasons than one. There are a good many things which we are anxious to discuss with you."

"The pleasure, then, is mutual," Mr. Grooten remarked affably. "Isobel is, I trust, well?"

"She is quite well," I answered.

"You are helping her to spend her time profitably, I am glad to find," he continued. "I saw two miniatures of hers yesterday at the Mordaunt Rooms."

"Isobel has gifts," I said. "We are doing our best to assist her in their development."

Mr. Grooten raised his eyes to mine. He looked at me steadily.

"Why have you refused to use the money which I placed to your credit at the National Bank for her?" he asked.

"Because," I answered, "we are not aware what right you have to provide for her."

Mr. Grooten smiled upon us — much as a sphynx might have smiled. It had the effect of making us both feel very young.

"My claim," he murmured, "must surely be as good as yours."

"Perhaps," I admitted. "At any rate, the money remains there in her name. She may find herself in greater need of it later on in life."

Mr. Grooten seemed to find some amusement in the idea.

"No," he said, "I do not think that that is likely. You could safely have used the money, but as you have not — well, it is of small consequence. I presume that attempts have been made to withdraw the child from your care?"

"Several," I told him. "Madame Richard and Lady Delahaye were equally importunate."

Grooten nodded.

"You have shown," he said, "an admirable discretion in refusing to give her up to either of them."

"And to-day," I continued, "a third claimant to the care of her has intervened. The Archduchess of Bristlaw herself has offered to relieve us of our guardianship."

Mr. Grooten dropped the cigarette which he had only just lit, and seemed for the moment unconscious of the fact. He made no effort to pick it up. He quivered as though someone had struck him a blow. For a man whose impassivity was almost a part of himself he was evidently deeply agitated.

"The Archduchess — has seen Isobel!" he muttered.

"They met by chance at the Mordaunt Rooms a few afternoons ago," I told him. "The Archduchess was accompanied by a girl of about Isobel's age. We came upon them suddenly, and the likeness was so marvellous that we were all startled. There was something in the nature of a scene. We left the Gallery at once, but the Archduchess sent one of her suite for me. I had some conversation with her concerning Isobel."

"Can you repeat it?" Grooten asked.

"In substance — yes," I told him. "The Archduchess plainly hinted that she believed Isobel to be connected morganatically with her family. She wished to take her under her own charge and provide for her."

"And you?"

"I thought it best to take some time for reflection. I had some idea of looking up the history of the Archduchess's family."

"You made no promise?"

"Certainly not. To tell you the truth, I was influenced by the presence of Lady Delahaye amongst the royal party. I have no faith in Lady Delahaye's good intentions with regard to Isobel."

Mr. Grooten flashed a quick glance upon me.

"Yet," he said softly, "report says that you and Lady Delahaye have been very good friends."

"That," I answered, "is beside the mark. I knew her before her marriage, but I have seen very little of her since. As a matter of fact, our relations at the present time are scarcely amicable. We have had a difference of opinion concerning our guardianship of Isobel. Lady Delahaye does not approve of her presence here with us."

Mr. Grooten smiled.

"That," he said, "is probable. May I proceed to ask a somewhat impertinent question? You were the guests to-night, I believe, of the Baron von Leibingen, who is, I understand, a *persona grata* with the Archduchess. I presume that your meeting in some way concerned Isobel?"

"Isobel was the sole cause of it," I answered.

"The Archduchess is a woman who perseveres. She declined to consider that my reply to her first tentative offer was in any way final. She passed the matter on to the Baron, and certainly until he lost his temper towards the end of our interview, he was a very efficient ambassador. He proved to us quite clearly that it was our duty to give Isobel up to those who had a better right to assume the charge of her, and he wound up by handing us cheques for — I think it was five thousand pounds each, was n't it, Allan?"

Mr. Grooten leaned back in his chair and laughed silently, yet with obvious enjoyment.

"That poor von Leibingen," he murmured, "how he blunders his way through life! Yet, my friend, I am afraid that this charge which I so thoughtlessly laid upon you is proving very troublesome. And you perceive that I do not even offer you a cheque."

Allan suddenly rose up and knocked the ashes from his pipe into the fire.

"You do not offer us a cheque, Mr. Grooten," he said quietly, "because you have perceptions. But there is another way in which you can recompense us for the trifling inconveniences to which we have been put. You can make our task easier — and more dignified; you can answer a question which I think I may say that we have an absolute right to ask you."

Mr. Grooten inclined his head slightly. He made no remark. Allan turned to me.

"Arnold," he said, "this is more your affair than mine, for it is you who have borne the brunt of it from the first. I do not wish to interfere in it unduly. But from every point of view, I think that the time

has come when all this mystery concerning Isobel's antecedents should be, so far as we are concerned at any rate, cleared up. Our hands would be immensely strengthened by the knowledge of the truth. Your friend here, Mr. Grooten, can tell us if he will. Ask him to do so. I will go further. I will even say that we have a right to insist upon it."

Mr. Grooten sat immovable. One could scarcely gather from his face that he had heard a word of Allan's speech.

"You are quite right, Allan," I answered. "Mr. Grooten," I continued, turning towards him, "you are the best judge as to whether your presence in this country is altogether wise, but I can assure you that for the last six months we have looked for you every day, and for this same reason. We want that question answered. The time has come when, in common justice to us and the child, the whole thing should be cleared up. Whatever knowledge rests with you is safe also with us. I think that we have proved that. I think that we have earned our right to your complete confidence. Mabane and I you can consider as one in this matter. You can speak before him as though we were alone. Now tell us the whole truth."

"I cannot," Mr. Grooten answered simply.

There was a certain crisp definiteness about those two words which carried conviction with them. Mabane and I were a little staggered. Our position was such a strong one, our request so reasonable, that I think that we had never realized the possibility of a refusal.

"May I ask you this?" Mabane said. "Do you

expect that we shall continue our — I suppose we may call it guardianship — of Isobel in the face of your present attitude?"

"I hope so, for the present," our visitor admitted softly.

"Notwithstanding," Mabane continued, "our absolute ignorance of everything connected with her, our lack of any sort of claim or title to the charge of her, and the increasing number of people who still persist in trying to take her from us?"

Mr. Grooten shrugged his shoulders.

"You omit to mention the factors in the situation which may be said to be on your side," he murmured.

"I should be interested to know what those are," I remarked.

"Certainly. The first and most powerful of all is, of course, possession."

Mabane nodded.

"And after that?"

"The fact that not one of the three people who have appealed to you for the charge of the child is in a position to use the only real force which exists in this land. I mean the law," Grooten continued.

This kept us silent again for a moment. Mabane, I could see, was getting a little ruffled.

"You pelt us with enigmas, sir," he said. "You answer our questions only by propounding fresh conundrums. One thing, at least, you may feel disposed to tell us. What is your own relationship to Isobel?"

"None," Mr. Grooten answered.

"Your interest, then?"

Mr. Grooten remained silent. He sat in his chair,

very still and very quiet. Yet in his eyes there shone for a moment something which seemed to bring into the little room the shadow of great things. Mabane and I both felt it. We had the sense of having been left behind. The little man in his chair seemed to have been lifted out of our reach into the mightier world of passion and suffering and self-conquest.

"I loved her mother," he said softly. "I was the man whom her mother loved."

There was a silence between us then. We had no more to say. We were at that moment his bounden slaves. But by some evil chance, after a lengthened pause, he continued —

"I, alas, could do little for the child. Yet when I heard that harm was threatened to her through that scamp Delahaye, I crossed the ocean at an hour's notice. I saved her from him. He deserved his fate, but I am no murderer by profession, and the shock unnerved me for a time. Then ——"

"Hush!" Mabane cried.

I sprang to the door. It had been thrust about a foot open. From outside came the sound of angry voices, followed by a moment's silence. Then a quick, shrill cry of triumph.

"Let me in. Oh, you shall not stop me now. I am going to see the man who boasts of being my husband's murderer!"

It was the voice of Lady Delahaye. She was already upon the threshold. I sprang to the table and saw her coming. Already she was behind the screen, stealing into the room, her head thrust forward, her lips parted, a peculiar glitter in her eyes. For a moment I stood rigid. The sight of her

fascinated me — there was something so wholly animal-like in the stealthy triumph of her tiptoe approach. I recovered myself just in time. One more step, a turn of her head, and she would have seen Grooten. My finger pressed down the catch of the lamp, and a sudden darkness filled the room.

She stopped short. Her fierce little cry of anger told me exactly where she was. I stepped forward and caught her wrists firmly. Then I faced where I knew Grooten was still sitting. I could see the red end of his cigarette still in his mouth.

"Leave the room at once," I said. "You can push the screen on one side, and you are within a yard of the door then. Please do exactly as I say, and don't reply."

"Let go my hands, sir! Arnold, how dare you! Let me go, or I'll scream the place down. Mr. Mabane, you will not permit this?" she cried, in a fury.

Mabane closed the door through which Grooten had already issued, and I heard the key turn in the lock. I released Lady Delahaye's hands, and she sprang away from me. As the flame from the lamp which Allan had just rekindled gained in power we saw her, still shaking the handle, but with her back now against the wall turned to face us. She was calmer than I had expected, but it was a terrible look which she flashed upon us.

"In how many minutes," she asked, "may I be released?"

Allan whispered in my ear.

"In five minutes, Lady Delahaye," I said. "I

regret very much the necessity for keeping you at all. May I offer you a chair?"

"You may offer me nothing, sir, except your silence," she answered swiftly.

She meant it too. I know the signs of anger in a woman's face as well as most men, and they were written there plainly enough. So for a most uncomfortable period of time we waited there until Allan, after a glance at his watch, went and opened the door. She passed out without remark, but from the threshold outside she turned and looked at me.

"I warned you once before, Arnold Greatson," she said, "that you were meddling with greater concerns than you knew of, and that harm would come to you for it. Now you have chosen to shield a murderer, and to use your strength upon a woman. These things will not go unforgotten!"

Mabane closed the door, and threw himself into an easy chair.

"For two easy-going sort of fellows, Arnold," he said to me, "we seem to be making a lot of enemies. Don't you think it would be a good idea if we drew stumps for a bit?"

"Meaning?" I asked.

"Roseleys!"

"We 'll go to-morrow," I declared.

CHAPTER V

"I HAVE never seen anything like this," Isobel said softly. I looked up from the writing-pad on my knee, and she met my glance with a smile of contrition.

"Ah," she said. "I forgot that I must not talk. Indeed, I did not mean to, but — look!"

I followed her eyes.

"Well," I said, "tell me what you see."

"There are so many beautiful things," she murmured. "Do you see how thick and green the grass is in the meadows there? How the quaker grasses glimmer? — you call them so, do you not? — and how those yellow cowslips shine like gold? What a world of colour it all seems. London is so grey and cold, and here — look at the sea, and the sky, with all those dear little fleecy white clouds, and the pink and white of all those wild roses wound in and out of the hedges. Oh, Arnold, it is all beautiful!"

"Even without a motor-car!" I remarked.

She looked at me a little resentfully.

"Motoring is very delightful," she said, "although you do not like it. Of course, it would be nice if Arthur were here!"

She looked away from me seawards, and I found myself studying her expression with an interest which had something more in it than mere curiosity. At

odd times lately I had fancied that I could see it coming. To-day, for the first time, I was sure. The smooth transparency of childhood, the unrestrained but almost animal play of features and eyes, reproducing with photographic accuracy every small emotion and joy — these things were passing away. Even before her time the child was seeking knowledge. As she sat there, with her steadfast eyes fixed upon the smooth blue line where sea and sky met, who could tell what thoughts were passing in her mind? Not I, not Mabane, nor any of us into whose care she had come. Only I knew that she saw new things, that the rush of a more complex and stronger life was already troubling her, the sweet pangs of its birth were already tugging at her heartstrings. My pencil rested idly in my fingers, my eyes, like hers, sought that distant line, beyond which lies ever the world of one's own creation. What did she see there, I wondered? Never again should I be able to ask with the full certainty of knowing all that was in her mind. The time had come for delicate reserves, the time when the child of yesterday, with the first faint notes of a new and wonderful song stealing into her heart, must fence her new modesty around with many sweet elusions and barriers, fairy creations to be swept aside later on in one glad moment—by the one chosen person. There was a coldness in my heart when I realized that the time had come even for the child who had tripped so lightly into our lives so short a time ago, to pass away from us into that other and more complex world. It was the decree of sex, nature's immutable law, sundering playfellows, severing friendships, driving its unwilling victims into

opposite corners of the world, with all the pitilessness of natural law. Nevertheless, the thought of these things as I looked at Isobel made me sad. She was young indeed for these days to come, for the shadows to steal into her eyes, and the song of trouble to grow in her heart.

"Tell me," I asked softly, "what you see beyond that blue line."

"I can tell you more easily," she said, glancing down with a faint smile at my empty pages, "what I see by my side — a very lazy man. And," she continued, crumpling a little ball of heather in her fingers and throwing it with unerring aim at Allan, "another one over there!"

"My picture," Allan protested, "is finished."

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed, preparing to rise, but he waved her back.

"In my mind," he added. "Don't misunderstand me. The casual and ignorant observer glancing just now at my canvas might come to the same conclusion as you — a conclusion, by-the-bye, entirely erroneous. I will admit that my canvas is unspoilt. Nevertheless, my picture is painted."

She looked across at him reproachfully.

"Allan, how dare you!" she exclaimed. "Only Arnold has the right to be subtle. I have always regarded you as a straightforward and honest person. Don't disappoint me."

"St. Andrew forbid it!" Allan declared. "My meaning is painfully simple. I build up my picture first in my mind. Its transmission to canvas is purely mechanical. Here goes!"

He took up his palette, and in a few moments was

hard at work. Isobel pointed downwards to my writing-pad.

"Can you too match Allan's excuse?" she asked. "Is your story already written?"

I shook my head.

"I have been watching you," I answered. "Besides, for a perfectly lazy person, are you not rather a hard task-mistress? Consider that this is our first day of summer — the first time we have seen the sun make diamonds on the sea, the first west wind which has come to us with the scent of cowslips and wild roses. I claim the right to be lazy if I want to be."

She smiled.

"The poet," she murmured, "finds these things inspiring."

"The poet," I answered, "is an ordinary creature. Nowadays he eats mutton-chops, plays golf, and has a banking account. The real man of feeling, Isobel, is the man who knows how to be idle. Believe me, there is a certain vulgarity in seeking to make a stock-in-trade of these delicious moments."

"That is not fair," she protested. "How should we all live if none of you did any work?"

"For your age, Isobel," I declared seriously, "you are very nearly a practical person. You make me more than ever anxious for an answer to my last question. What were you thinking of just now?"

Her eyes seemed to drift away from mine. A touch of her new seriousness returned. She pointed to that thin blue line.

"Beyond there," she said, "is to-morrow, and all

the to-morrows to come. One sees a very little way."

"Our limitations," I answered, "are life's lesson to us. If to-morrow is hidden, so much the more reason that we should live to-day."

"Without thought for the morrow?"

"Without care for it," I answered. "Are we not Bohemians, and is it not our text?"

She shook her head.

"It is not yours," she answered slowly. "I am sure of that."

I looked at her quickly.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say," she answered gravely. "Men and women to whom the present is sufficient surely cannot achieve very much in life. All the time they must concentrate powers which need expansion. I think that it must be those who try to climb the walls, those even who tear their fingers and their hearts in the great struggle for freedom, who can make themselves capable of great things, even if escape is impossible. But I do not think that escape is so impossible after all, is it? There have been men, and women too, who have lived in all times, to whom there have been no to-morrows or any yesterdays. Only it seems rather hard that life for those who seek it must always be a battle!"

I did not answer her for several minutes. It was true, then, that the old days had passed away. Isobel, the child whom we had known and loved so well, had disappeared. It was Isobel the incomprehensible who was taking her place. What might the change not mean for us? . . .

Later we walked back over an open heath yellow with gorse, and faintly pink with the promise of the heather to come. Isobel carried her hat in her hand. She walked with her head thrown back, and a smile playing every now and then upon her lips. She was so completely absorbed that I found myself every now and then watching her, half expecting, I believe, to find some physical change to accord with that other more mysterious evolution. She walked with all the grace of long limbs and unfettered clothing. Her figure, though perfectly graceful, and with that same peculiar distinction which had first attracted me, was as yet wholly immature. But in the face itself there were signs of a coming change. Wherein it might lie I could not tell, but it was there, an intangible and wholly elusive thing. I think that a certain fear of it and what it might mean oppressed me with the sense of coming trouble. I was more fully conscious then than ever before of the moral responsibility of our peculiar charge.

We crossed a straight dusty road, cleaving the rolling moor like a belt of ribbon. Isobel looked thoughtfully along it.

"I wonder," she said, "when Arthur will come down!"

The folly of a man is a thing sometimes outside his own power of control. A second before I had been wondering of whom and what she had been thinking.

"Not just yet, I'm afraid," Allan answered, stopping to light his pipe. "It is not easy for him to get backwards and forwards, and I believe that he is by way of being rather busy just now."

"What a nuisance!" Isobel declared, looking behind her regretfully. "The roads about here seem so good."

"The roads are good, but the heath is better," Allan answered. "I will race you for half a pound of chocolates to that clump of pines!"

"You are such a slow starter," she laughed, bounding away before he had time to drop his easel. "Make it a pound!"

I picked up Allan's easel and strolled away after them. Was it the motoring, I wondered, which had prompted her half-wistful question, or had I been wise too late? Arthur had been very confident. So much that he had said had carried with it a certain ring of truth. Youth and the temperament of youth were surely irresistible. Like calls to like across the garden of spring flowers with a cry which no interloper can still, no wanderer of later years can stifle. Somehow it seemed to me just then that the sun had ceased to shine, and a touch of winter after all was lingering in the western breeze . . .

They disappeared round the pine plantation, Isobel leading by a few yards, her skirts blowing in the wind, running still with superb and untired grace. I climbed a bank to gain a better view of the finish, and became suddenly aware that I was not the only interested spectator of their struggle. About a hundred yards to my left a man was standing on the top of the same bank, a pair of field-glasses glued to his eyes, watching intently the spot where they might be expected to reappear. The sight of him took me by surprise. A few moments ago I could have sworn that there was not a human being within a mile of

us. There was only one explanation of his appearance. He must have been concealed in the dry mossy ditch at the foot of the bank. It was possible, of course, that he might have been like us, a casual wayfarer, and yet the suddenness of his appearance, the intentness of his watch, both had their effect upon me. I moved a few yards towards him, with what object I perhaps scarcely knew. A dry twig snapped beneath my feet. He became suddenly aware of my approach. Then, indeed, my suspicions took definite shape, for without a moment's hesitation the man turned and strode away in the opposite direction.

I shouted to him. He took no notice. I shouted again, and he only increased his pace. I watched him disappear, and I no longer had any doubts at all. He was not in the least like a tramp, and his flight could bear but one interpretation. Isobel was not safe even here. We had been followed from London — we were being watched every hour. For the first time I began seriously to doubt what the end of these things might be.

CHAPTER VI

"SILENCE and perfume and moon-flooded meadows," Allan murmured. "Arnold, we shall all become corrupted. You will take to writing pastorals, and I — I — "

Isobel, from her seat between us, smiled up at him. Touched by the yellow moonlight, her face seemed almost ethereal.

"You," she said, "should paint a vision of the 'enchanted land.' You see those blurred woods, and the fields sloping up to the mists? Isn't that a perfect impression of the world unseen, half understood? Oh, how can you talk of such a place corrupting anybody, Allan!"

"I withdraw the term," he answered. "Yet Arnold knows what I meant very well. This place soothes while the city frets. Which state of mind do you think, Miss Isobel, draws from a man his best work?"

"Don't ask me enigmas, Allan," she murmured. "I am too happy to think, too happy to want to do anything more than exist. I wish we lived here always! Why didn't we come here long ago?"

"You forget the wonders of our climate," I remarked. "A month ago you might have stood where you are now, and seen nothing. You would have shivered with the cold. The field scents, the birds, the very insects were unborn. It is all a matter of

seasons. What to-day is beautiful was yesterday a desert."

She shook her head slowly. Bareheaded, she was leaning now over the little gate, and her eyes sought the stars.

"I will not believe it," she declared. "I will not believe that it is not always beautiful here. Arnold, Allan, can you smell the honeysuckle?"

"And the hay," Allan answered, smoking vigorously. "To-morrow we shall be sneezing every few minutes. Have you ever had hay fever, Isobel?"

She laughed at him scornfully.

"You poor old thing!" she exclaimed. "You should wear a hat."

"A hat," Allan protested, "is of no avail against hay fever. It 's the most insidious thing in the world, and is no respecter of youth. You, my dear Isobel, might be its first victim."

"Pooh! I catch nothing!" she declared, "and you must n't either. I 'm sure you ought to be able to paint some beautiful pictures down here, Allan. And, Arnold, you shall have your writing-table out under the chestnut tree there. You will be so comfortable, and I 'm sure you 'll be able to finish your story splendidly."

"You are very anxious to dispose of us all here, Isobel," I remarked. "What do you propose to do yourself?"

"Oh, paint a little, I suppose," she answered, "and — think! There is so much to think about here."

I shook my head.

"I am beginning to wonder," I said, "whether we did wisely to bring you."

"And why?"

"This thinking you are speaking of. It is bad!"

"You are foolish! Why should I not want to think?"

"If you begin to think you will begin to doubt," I answered, "and if you begin to doubt you will begin to understand. The person who once understands, you know, is never again really happy."

Isobel came and stood in front of me.

"Arnold!" she said.

"Well?"

"I wish you would n't talk to me always as though I were a baby," she said thoughtfully.

I took her hand and made her sit down by my side.

"Come," I protested, "that is not at all fair. I can assure you that I was taking you most seriously. The people who get most out of life are the people who avoid the analytical attitude, who enjoy but who do not seek to understand, who worship form and external beauty without the desire to penetrate below to understand the inner meaning of what they find so beautiful."

"That," she said, "sounds a little difficult. But I do not see how people can enjoy meaningless things."

"The source of all beauty is disillusioning."

"Seriously," Mabane interrupted, "if this conversation develops I am going indoors. Does Arnold want to penetrate into the hidden meaning of that cricket's chirp — or is he going to give us the chemical formula for the smell of the honeysuckle?"

Isobel laughed.

"He is rather trying to-night, is n't he?" she declared. "Listen! Is that someone going by?"

The footsteps of a man were clearly audible passing along the dusty little strip of road which fronted our cottage. Leaning forward I saw a tall, dark figure pass slowly by. From his height and upright carriage I thought that it must be the village policeman, and I called out good-night. My greeting met with no response. I shrugged my shoulders.

"Some of these village people are not particularly civil!" I remarked.

Mabane rose to his feet and strolled to the hedge.

"Those were not the footsteps of a villager," he remarked. "Listen!"

We stood quite still. The footsteps had ceased, although there was no other habitation for more than half a mile along the road. We could see nothing, but I noticed that Mabane was leaning a little forward and gazing with a curious intentness at the open common on the other side of the road. He stood up presently and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"What do you say to a drink, Arnold?" he suggested.

"Come along!" I answered. "There's some whisky and soda on the sideboard."

Isobel laughed at us. She would have lingered where she was, but Allan passed his arm through hers.

"Sentiment must not make you lazy, Isobel," he declared. "I decline to mix my own whisky and soda. Arnold," he whispered, drawing me back as

she stepped past us through the wide-open window, "I wonder if it has occurred to you that if any of our friends who are so anxious to obtain possession of Isobel were to attempt a coup down here, we should be rather in a mess. We 're a mile from the village, and Lord knows how many from a police-station, and there is n't a door in the cottage a man could n't break open with his fist."

"What made you think of it — just now?" I asked.

"Three men passed by, following that last fellow — on the edge of the common. I 've got eyes like a cat in the dark, you know, and I could see that they were trying to get by unnoticed. Of course, there may be nothing in it, but — thanks, Isobel! By Jove, that 's good!"

I slipped upstairs to my room, and on my return handed Allan something which he thrust quietly into his pocket. Then we went out again into the garden. I drew Mabane on one side for a moment.

"I don't think there 's anything in it, Allan," I whispered. "It would be too clumsy for any of our friends — and too risky."

"It need n't be either," Allan answered, "but I daresay you 're right."

Then we hastened once more to the front gate, summoned there by Isobel's cry.

"Listen!" she exclaimed, holding up her hand.

We stood by her side. From somewhere out of the night there came to our ears the faint distant throbbing of an engine. Neither Allan nor I realized what it was, but Isobel, who had stepped out on to the road, knew at once.

"Look!" she cried suddenly.

We followed her outstretched finger. Far away on the top of a distant hill, but moving towards us all the time with marvellous swiftness, we saw a small but brilliant light.

"A motor bicycle!" she cried. "I believe it is Arthur. It sounds just like his machine."

Arthur it was, white with dust and breathless. His first greeting was for Isobel, who welcomed him with both hands outstretched and a delight which she made no effort to conceal, overwhelming him with questions, frankly joyful at his coming. Mabane and I stood silent in the background, and we avoided each other's eyes. It was at that moment, perhaps, that I for the first time realized the tragedy into which we were slowly drifting. Isobel had forgotten us. She was wholly absorbed in her joy at Arthur's unexpected appearance. The thing which in my quieter moments had begun already vaguely to trouble me — a thing of slow and painful growth — assumed for the first time a certain definiteness. I looked a little way into the future, and it seemed to me that there were evil times coming.

Arthur approached us presently with outstretched hand. His manner was half apologetic, half triumphant. He seemed to be saying to himself that Isobel's reception of him must surely have opened our eyes.

"Your coming, I suppose, Arthur," Mabane said quietly, "signifies ——"

"That I accept your terms for the present," Arthur answered, in a low tone. "I had to see you. There are strangers continually watching our diggings,

and making inquiries about Isobel. There are things happening which I cannot understand at all."

I glanced towards Isobel.

"We will talk about it after she has gone to bed," I said. "Come in and have some supper now."

He drew me a little on one side.

"You remember the chap who was with the Archduchess at the Mordaunt Rooms?"

"Yes!"

"He was at the hotel in Guildford when I stopped for tea, with two other men. They're in a great Daimter car, and they're coming this way. I heard them ask about the roads."

"How far were they behind you?" I asked.

"They must be close up," he answered. "Listen!"

"Another motor!" Isobel cried suddenly. "Can you not hear it?"

There was no mistaking the sound, the deep, low throbbing of a powerful engine as yet some distance away. I was conscious of a curious sense of uneasiness.

"Isobel," I said, "would you mind going indoors!"

"Indoors indeed!" she laughed. "But no. I must see this motor-car."

I stepped quickly up to her, and laid my hand upon her arm.

"Isobel," I said earnestly, "you do not understand. I do not wish to frighten you, but I am afraid that the men in this car are coming here, and it is better that you should be out of the way. They want to take you from us. Go inside and lock yourself in your room."

She looked at me half puzzled, half resentful. The

car was close at hand now. We ourselves were almost in the path of its flaring searchlights.

"Arnold, you are joking, of course!" she exclaimed. "They cannot take me away. I would not go."

The car had stopped. It contained four men, one of whom at once alighted and advanced towards us. I knew him by his voice and figure. It was the Baron von Leibingen!

CHAPTER VII

I MADE no movement towards opening the gate. The newcomer advanced to within a few feet of me, and then paused. He leaned a little forward. He was doubtful, as I could see, of my identity.

"Can you tell me," he asked, raising his hat, "if this is Roseleys Cottage, the residence of Mr. Arnold Greatson?"

"Do you forget all your acquaintances so quickly, Baron?" I answered. "This is Roseleys, and I am Arnold Greatson!"

"Your voice," he declared, "is sufficient. I can assure you that it is a matter of eyesight, not of memory. In the dark I am always as blind as a bat."

"It is," I remarked, "a very common happening. You are motoring, I see. You have chosen a very delightful night, but are you not — pardon me — a little off the track? You are on your way to the South Coast, I presume?"

"On the contrary," the Baron answered, "our destination is here. Will you permit me to apologise for the lateness of my visit? We were unfortunately delayed for several hours by a mishap to our automobile, or I should have had the honour of presenting myself during the afternoon."

I did not offer to move.

"Perhaps," I said, "as it is certainly very late, and we were on the point of retiring, you will permit me to inquire at once into the nature of the business which procures for me the honour of this visit."

My visitor paused. His hand was upon the gate. So was mine, keeping it all the time fast closed.

"You will permit me?" he said, making an attempt to enter.

"I regret," I answered, "that at this late hour I am not prepared to offer you any hospitality. If you will come and see me to-morrow morning I shall be happy to hear what you have to say."

My visitor did not remove his hand from the gate. It seemed to me that his tone became more belligerent.

"You are discomposed to see us, Mr. Greatson," he said, "me and my friends. As you see," he added, with a little wave of his hand, "I am not alone. I have only to regret that you have made this visit necessary. We have come to induce you, if possible, to change your mind, and to give up the young lady in whom the Archduchess has been graciously pleased to interest herself to those who have a better claim upon her."

"It is not a matter," I answered, "which I am prepared to discuss at this hour — or with you!"

"As to that," the young man answered, "I am the envoy of her Royal Highness, as I can speedily convince you if you will."

"It is unnecessary," I answered. "The Archduchess has already had my answer. Will you allow me to wish you good-night?"

"I wish, Mr. Greatson," the young man said, "that you would discuss this matter with me in a reasonable spirit."

"At a reasonable hour," I answered, "I might be prepared to do so. But certainly not now."

It seemed to me that his hand upon the gate tightened. He certainly showed no signs of accepting the dismissal which I was trying to force upon him.

"I have endeavoured to explain my late arrival," he said. "You must not believe me guilty of wilful discourtesy. As for the rest, Mr. Greatson, what does it matter whether the hour is late or early? The matter is an important one. Between ourselves, her Highness has made up her mind to undertake the charge of the young lady, and I may tell you that when her Highness has made up her mind to anything she is not one to be disappointed."

"In her own country," I said, "the will of the Archduchess is doubtless paramount. Out here, however, she must take her chance amongst the others."

"But you have no claim — no shadow of a claim upon the child," the Baron declared.

"If the Archduchess thinks she has a better," I answered, "the law courts are open to her."

My visitor was apparently becoming annoyed. There were traces of irritation in his tone.

"Do you imagine, my dear Mr. Greatson," he said, "that her Highness can possibly desire to bring before the notice of the world the peccadiloes of her illustrious relative? No, the law courts are not to be thought of. We rely upon your good sense!"

"And failing that?"

The Baron hesitated. It seemed to me that he was peering into the shadows beyond the hedge.

"The position," he murmured, "is a singular one. Where neither side for different reasons is disposed to submit its case to the courts, then it must be admitted that possession becomes a very important feature in the case."

"That," I remarked, "is entirely my view. May I take the liberty, Baron von Leibingen, of wishing you good-night? I see no advantage in continuing this discussion."

"Possession for the moment," he said slowly, "is with you. Have you reflected, Mr. Greatson, that it may not always be so?"

"Will you favour me," I said, "by becoming a little more explicit?"

"With pleasure," the Baron answered quickly. "I have three friends here with me, and we are all armed. Your cottage is surrounded by half a dozen more — friends — who are also armed. We are here to take Isobel de Sorrens back with us, and we mean to do it. On my honour, Mr. Greatson, no harm is intended to her. She will be as safe with the Archduchess as with her own mother."

"If you don't take your hand off my gate in two seconds," I said, "you will regret it all your life."

He sprang forward, but I fired over his shoulder, and with an oath he backed into the road. Isobel meanwhile, now thoroughly alarmed, turned and ran towards the house, only to find the path already blocked by two men, who had stepped silently out from the low hedge which separated the garden from the fields beyond. Allan promptly knocked one of

them down, only to find himself struggling with the other. Isobel, whose skirts were caught by the fallen man, tried in vain to release herself. I dared scarcely turn my head, for my levelled revolver was keeping in check the Baron and his three friends.

"Baron," I said, "your methods savour a little too much of comic opera. You have mistaken your country and — us. There are three of us, and if you force us to fight — well, we shall fight. The advantage of numbers is with you, I admit. For the rest, if you succeed to-night you will be in the police court to-morrow."

The Baron made no answer. I felt that he was watching the struggle which was going on behind my back. I heard Isobel shriek, and the sound maddened me. I left it to the Baron to do his worst. I sprang backwards, and brought the butt end of my revolver down upon the skull of the man who was dragging her across the lawn. Then I passed my arm round her waist, and called out once more to the Baron who had passed through the gate, and was coming rapidly towards us.

"You fool!" I cried. "Unless you call off your hired gang and leave this place at once, every newspaper in London shall advertise Isobel's name and presence here to-morrow."

It was a chance shot, but it went home. I saw him stop short, and I heard his little broken exclamation.

"But you do not know who she is?" he cried.

"I know very well indeed," I answered.

Just then Mabane broke loose from the man with whom he had been struggling, and rushed to Arthur's assistance. The Baron raised his hand and

shouted something in German. Instantly our assailants seemed to melt away. The Baron stepped on to the strip of lawn and raised his hand.

"I call a truce, Mr. Greatson," he said. "I desire to speak with you."

I released my hold upon Isobel and turned to Mabane. Arthur too, breathless but unhurt, had struggled to his feet.

"Take her into the house," I said quickly. But her grasp only tightened upon my arm.

"I will not leave you, Arnold," she said. "I shall stay here. They will not dare to touch me."

I tried to disengage her arm, but she was persistent. She took no notice of Allan, who tried to lead her away. I stole a glance at her through the darkness. Her face was white, but there were no signs of fear there, nor were there any signs of childishness in her manner or bearing. She carried herself like an angry young princess, and her eyes seemed lit with smouldering fire, as clinging to my arm she leaned a little forwards toward the Baron.

"Why am I spoken of," she cried passionately, "as though I were a baby, a thing of no account, to be carried away to your mistress or disposed of according to your liking? Do you think that I would come, Baron von Leibingen ——"

She broke off suddenly. She leaned a little further forward. Her lips were parted. The fire in her eyes had given way to a great wonder, and the breathlessness of her silence was like a thing to be felt. It held us all dumb. We waited — we scarcely knew for what. Only we knew that she had something more to say, and we were impelled to wait for her words.

"I have seen you before," she cried, with a strange note of wonder in her tone. "Your face comes back to me — only it was a long time ago — a long, long time! Where was it, Baron von Leibingen?"

I heard his smothered exclamation. He drew quickly a step backwards as though he sought to evade her searching gaze.

"You are mistaken, young lady," he said. "I know nothing of you beyond the fact that the lady whom I have the honour to serve desires to be your friend."

"It is not true," she answered. "I remember you — a long way back — and the memory comes to me like an evil thought. I will not come to you. You may kill me, but I will not come alive."

"Indeed you are mistaken," he persisted, though he sought still the shadow of a rhododendron bush, and his voice quivered with nervous anxiety. "You have never seen me before. Surely the Archduchess, the daughter of a King, is not one whose proffered kindness it is well to slight? Think again, young lady. Her Highness will make your future her special charge!"

"If your visit to-night, sir," she answered, "is a mark of the Archduchess's good-will to me, I can well dispense with it. I have given you my answer."

"You will remember, Baron," I said, speaking at random, but gravely, and as though some special meaning lurked in my words, "that this young lady comes of a race who do not readily change. She has made her choice, and her answer to you is my answer. She will remain with us!"

The Baron stepped out again into the rich-scented twilight.

"You hold strong cards, Mr. Arnold Greatson," he said, "but I see their backs only. How do I know that you speak the truth? From whom have you learnt the story of this young lady's antecedents?"

"From Mr. Grooten," I answered boldly.

"I do not know the name," the Baron protested.

"He is the man," I said, "who set Isobel free!"

The Baron said something to himself in German, which I did not understand.

"You mean the man who shot Major Delahaye?" he asked.

"I do!"

"Then I would to Heaven I knew whose identity that name conceals," he cried fiercely.

"You would not dare to publish it," I answered, "for to do so would be to give Isobel's story to the world."

"And why should I shrink from that?" he asked.

I laughed.

"Ask your august mistress," I declared. "It seems to me that we know more than you think."

The Baron looked over his shoulder and spoke to his companions. From that moment I knew that we had conquered. One of them left and went outside to where the motor-car, with its great flaring lights, still stood. Then the Baron faced me once more.

"Mr. Greatson," he said, "you are playing a game of your own, and for the moment I must admit that you hold the tricks against me. But it is well that I should give you once more this warning. If you should decide upon taking one false step — you per-

haps know very well what I mean — things will go ill with you — very ill indeed."

Then he turned away, and our little garden was freed from the presence of all of them. We heard the starting of the car. Presently it glided away. We listened to its throbbing growing fainter and fainter in the distance. Then there was silence. A faint breeze had sprung up, and was rustling in the shrubs. From somewhere across the moor we heard the melancholy cry of the corncrakes. A great sob of relief broke from Isobel's throat — then suddenly her arm grew heavy upon mine. We hurried her into the house.

CHAPTER VIII

THE perfume from a drooping lilac-bush a few feet away from the open casement was mingled with the fainter odour of jessamine and homely stocks. In the soft morning sunshine the terrors of last night seemed a thing far removed from us. We sat at breakfast in our little sitting-room, and as though by common though unspoken consent we treated the whole affair as a gigantic joke. We ignored its darker aspect. We spoke of it as an "opera-bouffe" attempt never likely to be repeated — the hare-brained scheme of a mad foreigner, over anxious to earn the favour of his mistress. But beneath all our light talk was an undernote of seriousness. I think that Mabane and I, at any rate, realized perhaps for the first time that the situation, so far as Isobel was concerned, was fast becoming an impossible one.

After breakfast we all strolled out into the garden. Isobel, with her hands full of flowers, flitted in and out amongst the rose-bushes, laughing and talking with all the invincible gaiety of light-hearted youth, and Arthur hung all the while about her, his eyes following her every movement, telling her all the while by every action and look — if indeed the time had come for her to discern such things — all that our

compact forbade him to utter. Presently I slipped away, and shutting myself up in the tiny room where I worked, drew out my papers. In a few minutes I had made a start. I passed with a little unconscious sigh of relief into the detachment which was fast becoming the one luxury of my life.

An hour may have passed, perhaps more, when I was interrupted. I heard the door softly opened, and light footsteps crossed the room to my side. Isobel's hand rested on my shoulder, and she looked down at my work.

"Arnold," she exclaimed, "how dare you! You promised to read your story when you had finished six chapters, and you are working on chapter twenty now!"

Her long white forefinger pointed accusingly to the heading of my last page. Then I realized with a sudden flash of apprehension why I had not kept my promise — why I could never keep it. The story which flowed so smoothly from my pen was a record of my own emotions, my own sufferings. Even her name had usurped the name of my heroine, and stared up at me from the half-finished page. It was my own story which was written there, my own unhappiness which throbbed through every word and sentence. With a little nervous gesture I covered over the open sheets. I rose hastily to my feet, and I drew her away from the table.

"Another time, Isobel," I said. "It is too glorious a day to spend indoors, and Arthur has taken holiday too. Tell me, what shall we do?"

She looked at me a little doubtfully. I had grown into the habit of consulting her about my work, of

reading most of it to her. Sometimes, too, she acted as my secretary. Perhaps she saw something of the trouble in my face, for she answered me very softly.

"I should like," she said, "to sit there before the open window on a cushion, and to have you sit down in that easy-chair and read to me. That is how I choose to spend the morning!"

I shook my head.

"How about the others?" I asked.

"Oh, Arthur and Allan can go for a walk!" she declared.

"What selfishness," I answered, as lightly as I could. "Arthur must go back to town to-night, he says. I think that we ought all to spend the day together, don't you? I rather thought that you young people would have been off somewhere directly after breakfast."

She looked at me earnestly.

"Of course," she said, "if you want to be left alone ——"

"But I don't," I interrupted, reaching for my hat. "I want to come too."

"You nice old thing!" she exclaimed, passing her arm through mine. "We 'll walk to Heather Hill. Arthur says that we can see the sea from there. Come along!"

So we started away, the four of us together. Presently, however, Arthur and Isobel drew away in front. Allan, with a little grunt, stopped to light his pipe.

"Arthur may keep his compact in the letter," he said, "but in the spirit he breaks it every time their

eyes meet. You can't blame him. It 's human nature, after all — the gravitation of youth. Arnold, I 'm afraid you awoke to your responsibilities too late."

"You think — that she understands?" I asked quietly.

"Why not? She is almost a woman, and she is older than her years. Look at them now. He wants to talk seriously, and she is teasing him all the time. She has the instinct of her sex. She will conceal what she feels until the — psychological moment. But she does feel — she begins to understand. I am sure of it. Watch them!"

We kept silence for a while, I myself struggling with a sickening sense of despair against this newborn and most colossal folly. I think that I was always possessed of an average amount of self-control, but my great fear now was lest my secret should in any way escape me. Mabane's words had carried conviction with them. Life itself for these few deadly minutes seemed changed. The birds had ceased to sing, and the warmth of the sunshine had faded out of the fluttering east wind. I saw no longer the heath starred with yellow and purple blooms, the distant line of blue hills. The turf was no longer springy beneath my feet, a grey mist hung over the joyous summer morning. I was back again on my way from Bow Street, threading a difficult passage through the market baskets of Covent Garden, the child stepping blithely by my side, graceful even then, notwithstanding her immatureness, and quaintly attractive, though her deep blue eyes were full of tears, and the white terror had not passed wholly from her face. It was those few moments

of her complete and trustful helplessness which had transformed my life for me, those few moments in which the huge folly of these later days had been born. For her very coming seemed to have been at a chosen time — at one of those periods of weariness which a man must feel whose sympathy with and desire for life leads him into many and devious forms of distraction, only to find in time the same dregs at the bottom of the cup. The joy of her fresh childish beauty, her pure sweet trustfulness, at all times a delicate flattery to any man, just the more so to me, a little inclined towards self-distrust, was like a fragrant, a heart-stirring memory even now. I looked back upon these years which lay between her youth and my fast approaching middle-age — grey, weary years, whose follies seemed now to rise up and stalk by my side, the ghosts of misspent days, ghosts of the sickly reasonings of a sham philosophy which lead into the broad way because its thoroughfares are easy and pleasant, and pressed by the feet of the great majority. I kept my eyes fixed upon the ground and I felt that strange thrill of despair pulling at my heartstrings, dragging me downwards — the despair which is almost akin to physical suffering . . . And then a voice came floating back to me down the west wind. Its call at such a moment seemed almost symbolical.

"Come along, you very lazy people! Arnold, may I walk with you for a little way? Arthur is not at all brilliant this morning, and he does not amuse me."

"I am afraid," I began, "that as an entertainer ——"

"Oh, you want to smoke your pipe in peace, of

course," she interrupted, laughing, and passing her arm through mine. "Well, I am not going to allow it. I want you — to tell me things."

So our little procession was re-formed. Mabane, and Arthur with his hands deep in his pockets and an angry frown upon his forehead, walked on ahead. Behind came Isobel and I — Isobel with her hands clasped behind her, her head a little thrown back, a faint, wistful smile lightening the unusual gravity of her face. I looked at her in wonder.

"Come," I said, "what are the things you want me to talk to you about, and why are you tired of talking nonsense with Arthur?"

She did not look at me, but the smile faded from her lips. Her eyes were still fixed steadily ahead.

"I believe you think, Arnold," she said quietly, "that I am still a baby!"

I saw her lips quiver for a moment, and my selfishness melted away. I thought only of her.

"No, I do not think that, Isobel," I said gently. "Only if I were you I would not be in too great a hurry to grow up. It is when one is young, after all, that one walks in the gardens of life. Afterwards — when one has passed through the portals.— outside the roads are dusty, and the way a little wearisome. Stay in the gardens, Isobel, as long as you can. Believe me, that life outside has many disappointments and many sorrows. Your time will come soon enough."

She smiled at me a little enigmatically.

"And you?" she asked, "have you closed the gates of the garden behind you?"

"I am nearer forty than thirty," I answered. "I

have grey hairs, and I am getting a little bald. I may still be of some use in the world, and there are very beautiful places where I may rest, and even find happiness. But they are not like the gardens of youth. There is no other place like them. All of us who have hurried so eagerly away, Isobel, look back sometimes — and long!"

She shook her head. Perhaps a little of the sadness of my mood had after all found its way into my tone, for she looked at me with the shadow of a reproach in her deep blue eyes, a faint tenderness which seemed to me more beautiful than anything I had ever seen.

"I do not think that I like your allegory, Arnold," she said. "After all, the gardens are the nursery of life, are they not? The great things of the world are all outside."

I held my breath for a moment in amazement. Since when had thoughts like this come to her? I knew then that the days of her childhood were numbered indeed, that, underneath the fresh joyous grace of her delightful youth, the woman's instincts were stirring. And I was afraid!

"The great things, Isobel," I said slowly, "look very fine from a distance, but the power of accomplishment is not given to all of us. Every triumph and every success has its reverse side, its sorrowful side. For instance, the whole judgment of the world is by comparison. A great picture which brings fame to a man eclipses the work and lessens the reputation of another. A successful book takes not a place of its own, but the place of another man's work who must needs suffer for your success. Life is a battle

truly enough, but it is always civil war, the striving of humanity against itself. That is why what looks so great to you from behind the hedge may seem a very hollow thing when you have won the power to call it your own."

She looked at me as though wondering how far I were in earnest.

"I think," she said, smiling, "that you are trying to confuse me. Of course, I have not thought much about such things, but when I am a little older, if there was anything I could do I should simply try to do it in the best possible way, and I should feel that I was doing what was right. There is room for a great many people in the world, Arnold — a great many novelists and a great many artists and a great many thinkers! Some of us must be content with lesser places. I for one! . . ."

I walked home with Allan, and I spoke to him seriously.

"There is a duty before us," I said, "which up to now we have shirked. The time has come when we must undertake it in earnest."

"You mean?"

"We must abandon our negative attitude. Isobel comes, I am very sure, from no ordinary people. We must find out her place in life and restore her to it. She is a child no longer. It is not fitting that she should stay with us."

Mabane, too, was for a moment sad and silent. His face fell into stern lines, but when he answered me his tone was steady and resolute enough.

"You are right, Arnold," he answered. "We had better go back to London and begin at once."

It was perhaps a little ominous that I should find waiting for me on our return a telegram from Grooten:

"I must see you to-night. Shall call at your rooms twelve o'clock."

CHAPTER IX

ISOBEL interrupted the discussion with an imperative little tap upon the table.

"Please listen, all of you!" she exclaimed. "I have something to say, and an invitation for you all."

We had been dining at a little Italian restaurant on our way home, and over our coffee had been considering how to spend the rest of the evening. Arthur had declared for a music hall; Mabane and I were indifferent. Isobel up to now had said nothing.

"All my life," she said slowly, "I have been wanting to see Feurgéres. He is in London for one week with Rejani, and if we can get seats I am going to take you all. I have twenty pounds in my pocket from that nice man Mr. Grooten, who bought my other miniature, and I want to spend some of it."

Arthur, who understood no French, shook his head.

"Not the slightest chance of seats," he declared. "They 've all been booked for weeks."

"They often have some returned at the theatre," Isobel answered. "At least, if you others do not mind, we will go and see."

"Your proposal, Isobel," Allan said gravely, "indicates a certain amount of recklessness which reflects little credit upon us, your guardians. I propose——"

"Please do not be tiresome!" she interrupted. "Arnold, you will come with me, will you not?"

"I shall be delighted," I answered. "I am sure that we all shall. Only I am afraid that we shall not get in."

We paid the bill and walked to the theatre. The man at the ticket-office shook his head at our request for seats. People had been waiting in the streets since morning for the unreserved places, and the others had been booked weeks ago. But as we were turning away the telephone in his office rang, and he called us back.

"I have just had four stalls returned," he said. "You can have them, if you like."

"We are in morning dress," I remarked doubtfully.

"They are in the back row, so you can have them if you care to," he answered.

"What luck!" Isobel exclaimed, delighted. "Arnold, how glorious! Here is my purse. Will you pay for me, please?"

So we went in just as the curtain rose upon the first act of Rostand's great play. The house was packed with an immense audience. One box alone, the stage box on the left, was empty. I leaned over to Isobel, and would have told her the story which all the world knew.

"You see that box?" I whispered. "Wherever he plays it is always empty."

"I know," she answered. "His wife used to sit there — always in the same place; and after her death, whatever theatre he played at, he always insisted upon having it kept empty. They say that on great nights, when the people go almost wild with

enthusiasm, he looks into the shadows there almost as though he really saw her still sitting in her old place. It is a beautiful story."

"Done for effect!" Arthur muttered, and was promptly snubbed, as he deserved. They were friends again immediately afterwards, however, and I saw him attempt to hold her hand for a moment. Decidedly it was time that we carried out our new resolution.

I think that from the moment I took my seat I was conscious in some mysterious way of the coming of great things. There was a thrill of excitement in the air, a sort of stifled electricity which one realizes often amongst a highly cultured audience awaiting the production of a great work. But apart from this sensation of which I was fully conscious, I felt a curious sense of nervousness stealing in upon me for which I could in no way account. I knew what it meant only when, amidst a storm of cheers, Feurgéres entered. Then indeed I knew.

I kept silent, for which I was thankful, but the programme in my hand was crumpled into a little ball, and the figures upon the stage moved as though in a mist before my eyes. Isobel noticed nothing, for her whole breathless attention was riveted upon the play. I came to myself with the rich sweet voice of the man, so tender, so infinitely pathetic, ringing with a curious familiarity in my ears. From that moment I followed the movement of the play.

The curtain went down upon the first act amidst a silence so intense that it seemed as though people might be listening still for the echoes of that sad, sweet voice which had been playing so effectively

upon their heartstrings. Then came the storm of applause, which lasted for several minutes. I turned towards Isobel. She was sitting very still, and she did not join in the enthusiasm which seemed to find its way straight from the hearts of the men and women who sat about us. But her eyes were wet with tears, her lips a little parted. She gazed at the man whom incessant calls had brought at last a little wearily before the curtain, as one might look at a god. And their eyes met. He did not start or betray himself in any way — perhaps his training befriended him there, but as he left the stage he staggered, and I saw his hand go to clutch the curtain for support. I knew then that, before the night was over, Isobel's history would no longer be a secret to us.

She turned to me with a little smile of apology. There was a new look in her face too. She spoke gravely.

"Was I very stupid? I am sorry, but I could not help it. I have never seen anything like this before. It is wonderful!"

We talked quietly of the play, and I was astonished at the keenness of her perceptions, the unerring ease with which she had realized and appreciated the self-abnegation which was the great underlying *motif* of the whole drama. And in the midst of our conversation, what I had expected happened. A note was brought to me by an attendant.

"Come to me after the next act, and bring her. An attendant will be waiting for you at your left-hand door of egress."

Mabane and Arthur had gone out to have a smoke.

I had still a moment before the curtain went up. I leaned over towards Isobel.

"Isobel," I said, "I am going to tell you something which will surprise you very much. It is necessary that I tell you at once. If you answer me at all do not speak above a whisper."

She only slightly moved her head. I had not any fear of her betraying herself.

"You have seen Feurgéres before. It was in the *café*. He was my companion when I saw you first."

"Mr. Grooten!" she murmured, so softly that her lips seemed scarcely to move.

I nodded assent.

"You knew?"

"Not until to-night."

She was very pale, but her self-control was complete.

"He wishes us — you and I — to go round to his room after this act. You will be prepared?"

"Of course," she answered simply.

Mabane and Arthur came back, and the latter whispered several times in her ear. I doubt, however, whether she heard anything. She sat through the whole of the next act like one in a dream, only her eyes never left the stage — never left, indeed, the figure of the man from whom all the greatness of the play seemed to flow. As the curtain fell I leaned over to Arthur.

"Isobel and I are going to pay a visit," I said. "We shall be back in time for the next act."

"A visit!" he repeated doubtfully. "Is there anyone we know here, then?"

"Allan will explain," I answered. "You had better tell him," I whispered to Mabane.

Allan was looking very serious. I think that he questioned the wisdom of what I was doing.

"You are going to see him?" he asked, in a low tone.

"He has sent for us," I answered.

We found the attendant waiting, and by a devious route along many passages and through many doors we reached our destination at last. Our guide knocked at a door on which was hanging a little board with the name of "Monsieur Feurgéres" painted across it. Almost immediately we were bidden to enter. Monsieur Feurgéres was sitting with his back to us before a long dressing-table. He turned at once to the servant who stood by his side.

"Come back five minutes before my call," he ordered. "That will be in about twenty minutes from now."

The man bowed and silently withdrew. Not until he had left the room did Feurgéres move from his place. Then he arose to his feet and held out his hands to Isobel.

"I knew your mother, Isobel!" he said simply.

CHAPTER X

ISOBEL never hesitated. I think that instinctively she accepted him without demur. Her eyes flashed back to him all those nameless things which his own greeting had left unspoken. She took his hands, and looked him frankly in the face.

"All my life," she said softly, "I have wanted to meet someone who could say that to me."

He was dressed in a suit of mediæval court clothes, black from head to foot, and fashioned according to the period of the play in which he was acting. But if he had worn the garments of a pierrot or a clown, one would never have noticed it. The man's individuality, magnetic and irresistible, triumphed easily. Mr. Grooten had passed away. It was the great Feurgéres, whose sad shining eyes lingered so wistfully upon Isobel's face.

"I can say more than that," he went on. "And now that I see you, Isobel, I wonder that I have not said it long ago. You are like her, child — very like her!"

"I am glad," Isobel murmured. "Please tell me — everything!"

"Everything — for me — is soon told," he answered, his voice dropping almost to a whisper, his eyes still fixed upon Isobel's, yet looking her through

as though she were a shadow. "I loved your mother. I was the man — whom your mother loved! The years of my life began and ended there."

Their hands had fallen apart a little while before, but Isobel, with an impulsive gesture, stooped down and raised the fingers of his left hand to her lips. I turned away. It seemed like sacrilege to watch a man's soul shining in his eyes. I walked to the other end of the long narrow room, and examined the swords which lay ready for use against the wall. It was not many minutes, however, before Feurgéres recalled me.

"To-night," he said, "I was coming to see Mr. Greatson."

"It is better," she murmured, "to have met you like this."

He smiled very slightly, yet it seemed to me that the curve of his lips was almost a caress. There was certainly nothing left now of Mr. Grooten.

"I think that I, too, am glad," he said. "Your mother suffered all her life because she permitted herself to care for me. We mummers, you see, Isobel, though the world loves to be amused, are always a little outside the pale. I think," he added, with a curious little note of bitterness in his tone, "that we are not reckoned worthy or capable of the domestic affections."

"You do not believe — you cannot believe," she murmured, "that there are many people who are so foolish! It is the dwellers in the world who are mummers — those who live their foolish, orderly lives with their eyes closed, and oppressed all the while with a nervous fear of what their neighbours

are thinking of them. Those are the mummers — but you — you, Monsieur, are Feurgéres — the artist! You make music on the heartstrings of the world!"

For myself I was astonished. I had not often seen Isobel so deeply moved. I had never known her so ready, so earnest of speech. But Feurgéres was almost agitated. For the first time I saw him without the mask of his perfect self-control. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes were soft as a woman's. He raised Isobel's hand to his lips, and his voice, when he spoke, shook with real emotion.

"You are the daughter of your mother, dear Isobel," he said. "Beyond that, what is there that I can say — I, who loved her!"

"You can tell me about her," Isobel said gently. "That is what I have been hoping for!"

"A little, a very little," he answered, "and more to-night, if you will. I have already written to Mr. Greatson, and I meant in a few hours to tell him everything. But I would have you know this, Isobel, and remember it always. Your mother was a holy woman. For my sake, for the sake of the love she bore me, she abandoned a great position. She broke down all the barriers of race, and all the conventions of a lifetime. She lost every friend she had in the world; she even, perhaps, in some measure, neglected her duty to you. Yet you were seldom out of her thoughts, and her last words committed you to my distant care. I have, perhaps, ill-fulfilled her charge, Isobel. Yet I have been watching over you sometimes when you have not known it."

"You were my saviour once," she said, "you and Arnold here, when I sorely needed help."

"I came from America at a moment's notice," he said, "when it seemed to me that you might need my help. I broke the greatest contract I had ever signed, and I placed my liberty, if not my life, at the mercy of your wonderful police system. But those things count for little. I have been forced, Isobel, to leave you very much to yourself. You come of a race who would regard any association with me as defilement. And there is always the chance that you may be able to take your proper position in the world. That is why it has been my duty to keep away from you, why I have been forced to leave to others what I would gladly have done myself. To-night you will understand everything."

"Nothing that you can tell me of my family or myself," she answered, "will ever make me forget that, whereas of them I know nothing, you have been my guardian angel. It was you who rescued me from the one person in this world of whom I have been miserably, hatefully afraid. It was not my family who saved me. It was you!"

A shrill bell was ringing outside. We heard the commotion of hurrying footsteps, the call-boy's summons, the creaking of moving scenery. Feurgéres glanced at the watch which stood upon his table. His manner seemed to undergo a sudden change. The man no longer revealed himself.

"The curtain is going up," he said. "I can stay with you but two minutes longer. I am coming to see Mr. Greatson to-night, Isobel, after the performance, and I wish to see him alone. This is at once our meeting and our farewell."

"Our farewell!" she repeated doubtfully. "Surely

you are not going to leave us — so soon! You cannot mean that?"

"To-morrow," he said, "I leave for St. Petersburg. My engagement there has been made many months ago. But even if it were not so, dear child, our ways through life must always lie far apart. If the necessity for it had not existed, I should not have left you to the care of — of even Mr. Greatson. To be your guardian, Isobel, would not be seemly. That you will better understand — to-morrow."

"Indeed!" she protested, "I would sooner hear it now from your own lips — if, indeed, it must be so!"

He shook his head very slowly, but with a decision more finite than the most emphatic negation which words could have framed.

"I must go away, Isobel," he said, "and you and I must remain apart. I will only ask you to remember me by this. I am the man your mother loved. Nothing else in my life is worth considering — but that. I am one of those with whom fate has dealt a little hardly. I am as weary of my work as I am of life itself. I go on because it was her wish. But I cannot forget. The past remains — a blazing page of light. The present is a very empty and a very cold place. My days here are a sort of aftermath. My life ended with hers. To-night, for one moment — I want you to take her place."

Isobel looked at him eagerly.

"Tell me how," she begged. "Tell me what to do!"

"It may sound very foolish," he said, with a faint smile, "but I have a fancy, and I am sure that you will do as I ask. I want you to sit where she sat night

after night. You will find some flowers in her chair. Keep them. They were the ones she preferred."

There was an imperative knocking at the door. Feurgéres caught up his plumed hat and sword.

"I am ready," he said quietly. "Mr. Greatson, my servant will take you to the box, which I beg that you and Isobel will occupy for the rest of the evening. It is a harmless whim of mine, and I trust that it will not inconvenience you."

With scarcely another word he left us, and a moment later we heard the roar of applause which greeted his appearance on the stage. Isobel's eyes kindled, and she moved restlessly towards the door.

"I do hope," she said, "that someone will come for us soon. I want to hear every word. I hate to miss any of it."

The dark-visaged servant stood upon the threshold.

"I have orders from Monsieur Feurgéres," he announced respectfully, "to conduct you to his box. If Mademoiselle will permit!"

We followed him on tiptoe to the front of the house. He unlocked the door of the left-hand stage box with a key which he took from his pocket.

"Monsieur will permit me to remark," he whispered, "that this is the first time since I have been in the service of Monsieur Feurgéres that anyone has occupied his private box. I trust that Mademoiselle will be comfortable."

Then the door closed behind him, and we were left to ourselves.

CHAPTER XI

ISOBEL, her chair drawn a little behind the curtain, was almost invisible from the house. With both hands she held the cluster of pink roses which she had found upon the seat. Gravely, but with wonderful self-composure, she followed the action of the play with an intentness which never faltered. Occasionally she leaned a little forward, and at such moments her profile passed the droop of the curtain, and was visible to the greater part of the audience. It was immediately after one of such movements that I noticed some commotion amongst the occupants of the box opposite to us. Their attention seemed suddenly drawn towards Isobel — two sets of opera-glasses were steadily levelled at her. A woman, whose neck and arms were ablaze with diamonds, raised her lorgnettes, and, regardless of the progress of the play, kept them fixed in our direction. I changed my position to obtain a better view of these people, and immediately I understood.

I saw the house now for the first time, and I saw something which pleased me very little. We were immediately opposite the Royal box, which, with the one adjoining, was occupied by a very brilliant little party. The Archduchess was there. It was she whose lorgnettes were still unfalteringly directed

towards Isobel. Lady Delahaye sat in the background, and a greater personage than either occupied the chair next to the Archduchess. Soon I saw that they were all whispering together, all still looking from Isobel towards the stage, and from the stage to Isobel; and in the background was a man whose coat was covered with orders, and who held himself like a soldier. He looked at Isobel as one might look at a ghost. I stood back almost hidden in the shadows, and I wondered more than ever what the end of all these things might be.

Towards the close of the act that wonderful voice, with its low burden of sorrow so marvellously controlled, drew me against my will to the front of the box. He stood there with outstretched arms, the prototype of all pathos, and the low words, drawn as it were against his will from his tremulous lips, kept the whole house breathless. His arms dropped to his side, the curtain commenced to fall. In that moment his eyes, suddenly uplifted, met mine. It seemed to me that they were charged with meaning, and I read their message rightly. After all, though, I am not sure that I needed any warning.

The curtain fell. There was twenty minutes' interval. Isobel sat back in her chair, and her hand lingered lovingly about the roses which lay upon her lap. I did not speak to her. I knew that she was living in a little world of her own, into which any ordinary intrusion was almost sacrilege. Arthur and Allan had left their places. I judged rightly that they had gone home. So I sat by myself, and waited for what I knew was sure to happen.

And presently it came — the knock at the box door

for which I had been listening. I rose and opened it. A tall young Englishman, with smooth parted hair, whose evening attire was so immaculate as to become almost an offence, stood and stared at me through his eyeglass.

"Mr. Greatson!" he suggested. "Mr. Arnold Greatson?"

I acknowledged the fact with becoming meekness.

"My name is Milton," he said — "Captain Angus Milton. I am in the suite of the Archduchess for this evening. Her Highness occupies the box opposite to yours."

I bowed.

"I have noticed the fact," I answered. "The Archduchess has been good enough to favour us with some attention."

The young man stared at me for some moments. I found myself able to endure his scrutiny.

"Her Highness desires that you and the young lady" — for the first time he bowed towards Isobel — "will be so good as to come to the anteroom of the Royal box. She is anxious for a few minutes' conversation with you."

"The Archduchess," I answered, "does us too much honour! I shall be glad, however, if you will inform her that we will take another opportunity of waiting upon her. Miss de Sorrens is much interested in the play."

The young man dropped his eyeglass. I was proud of the fact that I had succeeded in surprising him.

"You mean," he exclaimed softly, "that you won't — that you don't want to come?"

"I do not know any reason" Isobel answered, "why I should do your bidding." Page 192.

The Master Mummer.

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"Precisely," I answered. "I have already had the honour of one interview with the Archduchess, and I imagine that no useful purpose would be served by re-opening the subject of our discussion!"

"The young lady, then?" he remarked, turning again to Isobel.

"The young lady remains under my charge," I answered. "You will be so good as to express my regrets to the Archduchess."

He hesitated for a moment, and then, with a slight bow to Isobel, left us. She spoke to me, and we had been so long silent that our voices sounded strange.

"Thank you, Arnold," she said quietly. "This is all so wonderful that I could not bear to have it disturbed."

"I pray that it may not be," I answered. "The Archduchess's interest is flattering, but mysterious. I for one do not trust her. I wish ——"

I broke off in my speech, for I saw that the principal seat in the opposite box was vacant. As for Isobel, I doubt whether she noticed my sudden pause. Her hands were still caressing the soft pink blossoms in her lap, her eyes were fixed upon vacancy. She was in a sort of dream, from which I did not care to rouse her. I knew very well that the awakening would come fast enough.

Another imperative tap upon the door. I opened it, and the Archduchess swept past me. In the darkness of our box her diamonds glittered like fire, the perfume from her draperies was stronger by far than the delicate fragrance of the roses which Isobel still

held. Me she ignored altogether. She went straight up to Isobel, and, stooping down, rested her gloved hand upon the girl's shoulder.

"I sent for you just now," she said. "Did you not understand?"

Isobel raised her eyebrows. The Archduchess was angry, and her voice betrayed her.

"I do not know any reason," Isobel answered, "why I should do your bidding."

The Archduchess was silent for a moment. I think that she was waiting until she could control her voice.

"Isobel," she said, "I will tell you a very good reason. I cannot keep silence any longer. They will not give you up to me any other way, so I have come to claim you openly. You shall know the truth. I am your mother's sister!"

Isobel rose slowly to her feet. She was as tall as the Archduchess, and the likeness which had always haunted me was unmistakeable. Only Isobel was of the finer mould, and her eyes were different.

"Why did you not tell me this before — at the Mordaunt Rooms, for instance?" she asked.

"You came upon me like a thunderclap," the Archduchess answered quickly. "For years we had lost all trace of you. Besides, there were reasons — you know that there were reasons why I might surely have been forgiven for hesitating. But let that go. We had better have your story blazoned out once more to the world than that you should live your life in this hole-and-corner fashion. I shall take you back to Waldenburg. I presume, sir!" she added, turning suddenly towards me, "that even you will not ques-

tion my right to assume the guardianship of my own niece?"

The memory of Feurgéres' look came to my aid, or I scarcely know how I should have answered her.

"Your Highness," I said, "it is for Isobel to decide. She is no longer a child. Only I would remind you that you have on more than one occasion endeavoured to assume that guardianship without mentioning any such relationship."

"You know Isobel's history," the Archduchess answered. "Can you wonder that I was anxious to avoid all publicity?"

"Your Highness," I said, "we do not know Isobel's history — yet. We shall hear it to-night."

"He has not told you — yet?" she asked incredulously.

"He is coming to my rooms to-night," I answered.

"You shall hear it before then," she exclaimed, with a little laugh. "Put on your hat, child. We will drive to my house, you and I and Mr. Greatson, and I will tell you everything. You will know then how greatly that man insulted you by daring to allow you to occupy this box, to approach you at all."

"Madame," Isobel said, "I thank you, but I wish to hear the end of the play. And as for my history, Monsieur Feurgéres has promised to tell it to Mr. Greatson to-night."

I saw the Archduchess's teeth meet, and a spot of colour that burned in her cheeks.

"You talk like a fool, child," she said fiercely.

"You are being deceived on every side. It is not fit that that man should come into your presence. It is a disgrace that you should mention his name."

"Mr. — Monsieur Feurgéres has proved himself my friend," Isobel answered quietly.

The Archduchess's eyes were burning. She was a woman of violent temper, and it was fast becoming beyond her control.

"Child," she said, "I am your aunt, the daughter of the King of Waldenburg. You, too, are of the same race. You know well that I speak the truth. How dare you talk to me of a creature like Feurgéres? You have our blood in your veins. I command you to come with me, and break off at once and for ever these remarkable associations. You shall make what return you will later on to those whom you may think" — she darted a contemptuous glance at me — "have been your friends. But from this moment I claim you. Come!"

Isobel looked her aunt in the face. She spoke courteously, but without faltering.

"Madame," she said, "it is not possible for me to do as you ask. Whatever plans are made for my future, it is to my dear friend here," she said, looking across at me with shining eyes, "that I owe everything. And as for Monsieur Feurgéres, I have promised him to occupy this box for this evening, and I shall do so."

The Archduchess was very white.

"You force me to tell you, child," she said. "This creature Feurgéres was your mother's ——"

"Your Highness!" I cried.

She stopped short and bit her lip. Isobel was very

pale, but she pointed to the door. The orchestra had commenced to play.

"Madame," she said, "Monsieur Feurgéres loved my mother. I shall keep my word to him."

There was a soft knock at the door. Captain Milton stood on the threshold.

"Your Highness," he said, bowing low, "the curtain will rise in thirty seconds."

The Archduchess left us without a word.

CHAPTER XII

IT was not often we permitted ourselves such luxuries, but as we left the theatre I caught a glimpse of Isobel's white face, more clearly visible now than in the dimly lit box, and I knew that, bravely though she had carried herself through the whole of that trying evening, she was not far from breaking down. So I called a hansom, and she sank back in a corner with a little sigh of relief. I lit a cigarette, and suddenly I felt a cold little hand steal into mine. I set my teeth and held it firmly.

"Arnold," she whispered, and her voice was none too steady, "I hate that woman. I do not care if she is my aunt; and — Arnold ——"

"Yes."

"I believe that she hates me too. She looks at me as though I were something unpleasant, as though she wished me dead. I will not go to her, Arnold. Say that I shall not."

For a moment I was silent. Her little womanish airs of the last few months, the quaint effort of dignity with which it seemed to have pleased her to add all that was possible to her years, had wholly departed. She was a child again, with frightened eyes and quivering lips, the child who had walked so easily into our hearts in those first days of her terror. To think of her as such again was almost a relief.

"Dear Isobel," I said, "the Archduchess has told me now two different stories concerning you. She appears to be very anxious to have you in her care, but her methods up to the present have been very strange. We shall not give you up to her unless we are obliged. But ——"

"Please what, Arnold?" she interrupted anxiously.

"If the Archduchess is indeed your aunt, as she says she is, you must have hundreds of other relations, many of whom you would without doubt find very different people. Besides, in that case, you see, Isobel, you ought to be living altogether differently. It is absurd for you to be grubbing along with us in an attic when you ought to be living in a palace, with plenty of money and servants and beautiful frocks, and all that sort of thing. You understand me, don't you?" I concluded a little lamely, for the steady gaze of those deep blue frightened eyes was a little disconcerting.

"No, I do not," she answered. "If I am a Waldenburg and the niece of the Archduchess, why was I left alone at that convent for all those years, and who was responsible for sending that man to fetch me away — that terrible man? How are they going to explain that, these wonderful relations of mine? Oh, Arnold, Arnold!" she cried, suddenly swaying over towards me in the cab, "I don't want to leave you — all. Do not send me away. Promise that you will not!"

A child, I told myself fiercely, a mere child this! Nevertheless I was thankful for the darkness of the silent street into which we had turned, the darkness which hid my face from her. Her soft breath was

upon my cheek, her beautiful head very near my shoulder. Oh, I had need of all my strength, of all my common-sense.

"Dear Isobel," I said, looking straight ahead of me out of the cab, "I cannot make you any promise. All must depend upon what Monsieur Feurgéres tells us to-night. Nothing would make me — all of us — happier than to keep you with us always. But it may not be our duty to keep you, or yours to stay. Until we have heard Feurgéres' story we are in the dark."

She shrank, as it seemed, into herself. Her eyes followed mine hauntingly.

"Arnold," she said, with a little tremor in her tone, "you are not very kind to me to-night, and I feel — that I want — people to be kind to me just now."

I bent down, and I raised her hands to my lips and kissed them.

"My dear child," I said, "don't forget that I am your guardian, and I have to think for you — a long way ahead. As for the rest, I have not a single thought or hope in life which is not concerned for your happiness."

"I like that better," she murmured; "but — you are very fond of my hands."

Fortunately the cab pulled up with a jerk. I paid the man, and we commenced to climb up the stone steps towards our rooms. Isobel, who was generally a couple of flights ahead, slipped her hand through my arm and leaned heavily upon me.

"Arnold," she whispered, "why would you not read your story to me. Tell me, please!"

"My dear child!" I exclaimed, "what made you think of that just now?"

She leaned forward. I think that she was trying to look into my face.

"Never mind! Please tell me," she begged.

"I will read it some day," I answered. "It is so incomplete. I think I shall have to rewrite it."

She shook her head.

"You have always read to me before just as you have written it. I think that you are not quite so nice to me, Arnold, as you were. I have n't done anything that you do not like, have I? Because I am sure that you are different!"

"You absurd child," I answered, smiling at her as cheerfully as I could. "You are in an imaginative frame of mind to-night."

"It is not that! You look at me differently, you do not seem to want to have me with you so much, and ——"

I stopped her. We had reached the fourth floor, where our apartments were. With the key in the lock I turned and faced her for a moment. She was as tall as I, and a certain grace of carriage which she had always possessed, and which had grown with her years, redeemed her completely from the *gaucherie* of her uncomfortable age. Her features had gained in strength, and lost nothing in delicacy. She wore even her simple clothes with the nameless grace which must surely have come to her from inheritance. I spoke to her then seriously. Yet if I had tried I could not have kept the kindness from my tone.

"Dear Isobel," I said, "if there is any difference — think! A year ago you were a child. To-day

you are a woman. You must understand that, side by side with the pleasure of having you with us — the greatest pleasure that has ever come into our lives, Isobel — has come a certain amount of responsibility."

"I am becoming a trouble to you, then!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"A trouble, Isobel!"

I suppose I weakened for a moment. Some trick of tone or expression must have let in the daylight, for she suddenly held out her hands with a soft little cry. And then as she stood there, her eyes shining, the old delightful smile curving her lips, the door before which she stood was thrown open, and Arthur stood there. He had on his hat and coat, and I saw at once that he was not himself. His cheeks were flushed with anger, and he looked at us with a black frown.

"So you've come back, then!" he exclaimed. "Allan and I got tired of waiting. Just in time to say good-bye, Isobel. I'm off!"

"Off? But where?" she asked, looking at him in surprise.

I left them, and passed on into our studio sitting-room, where Mabane was filling his pipe.

"What's the matter with Arthur?" I asked.

"Off his chump," Allan answered gravely. "Don't take any notice of him."

Isobel and he were still talking together. Arthur's voice was a little raised — then it suddenly dropped.

"I think," Allan said, "that you had better interfere. Arthur has lost his temper. I am afraid ——"

"He will break the compact?" I exclaimed.

"I am afraid so!"

I stepped back into the little hall. They were talking together earnestly. Arthur looked up and glared at me.

"Arthur," I said, "Allan and I want a few words with you before you go — if you are going out to-night."

"In a moment," he answered. "I have something to say to Isobel."

But Isobel had gone. He looked for a moment at the door of her room through which she had vanished, and then he turned on his heel and followed me. He threw his hat upon the table and faced us both defiantly.

"It is I," he said, "who have something to say to you, and I'd like to get it over quick. D—n your hypocritical compact, Arnold Greatson! There! You're in love with Isobel! Any fool can see it, and you want to keep the child all to yourself."

Allan took a quick step forward, but I held out my hand.

"Don't interfere, Allan," I said. "Let him say all that he has to say."

"I mean to!" Arthur continued, "and I hope you'll like it. The compact was a fraud from beginning to end, and I'll have no more to do with it. Isobel's too old to live here with you fellows, and I'm going to ask her to marry me. I'm going to advise her to go and stay with Lady Delahaye, who wants her, and I'm going to marry her from there if she'll have me."

"Lady Delahaye," I repeated thoughtfully. "You have been in communication with her, have you?"

"Yes, I have! And I think she's right. Isobel ought to have some women friends. She may have enemies, but I'm not so sure about that. Lady Delahaye is n't one of them, at any rate. The people who want to get her away from here may be her best friends, after all."

"Is that all, Arthur?"

"It's enough, is n't it?" he answered doggedly.

"Quite! Now listen," I said. "To-night we are going to hear Isobel's history. We are going to know who she is, and all about her. Stay with us, and you shall share the knowledge. As for the rest, you have been talking like a fool. We do not wish to take you seriously. We took up the charge of Isobel jointly. If the time has come now for us to give her up, I should like us all to be in agreement. It is very likely that the time has come. I, too, think that in many ways it would be for her benefit. We are prepared to give her up when we know the proper people to undertake the care of her — but never, Arthur, to Lady Delahaye."

Arthur smiled slowly, but it was not a pleasant smile.

"Ah!" he said, "I forgot. Lady Delahaye is an old friend of yours, is n't she?"

"Your insinuations are childish, Arthur," I answered. "Lady Delahaye is an old friend of the Archduchess's, and their interest in Isobel is identical. For many reasons I am going to know Isobel's history before I give her up to either of them."

"And who is going to tell it to you?" he asked.

"Feurgéres," I answered. "He sent for us at the theatre to-night. He is coming on here."

There was a sharp tapping at the door. I moved across the room to open it. Arthur threw his hat upon the table.

"I will wait!" he declared.

CHAPTER XIII

WE all knew Isobel's history. It had taken barely twenty minutes to tell it, but they had been twenty minutes of tragedy. We were all, I think, in different ways affected. Monsieur Feurgéres alone sat back in his seat like a carved image, his face white and haggard, his deep-set eyes fixed upon vacancy. We felt that he had passed wholly away from the world of present things. He himself was lingering amongst the shadows of that wonderful past, upon which he had only a moment before dropped the curtain. He had told us to ask him questions, but I for my part felt that questions just then were a sacrilege. Arthur, however, seemed to feel nothing of this. It was he who took the lead.

"Isobel, then," he said, "is the granddaughter of the King of Waldenburg, the only child of his eldest daughter! Her mother was divorced from her husband, Prince of Herrshoff, and afterwards married to you. What about her father?"

"He died two years after the divorce was granted," Feurgéres said without turning his head. "Isobel was hurried away from the Court through the influence of her aunt, the Archduchess of Bristlaw, and sent to a convent in France. It was not intended that she should ever re-appear at the Court of Waldenburg."

"Why not?"

"The King is very old, and he is the richest man in Europe. Isobel is the daughter of his eldest and favourite child. The Archduchess also has a daughter, and, failing Isobel, she will inherit."

"Has the King," I asked, "taken any steps to discover Isobel?"

"He has been told that she is dead," Feurgéres answered.

We were all silent then for several minutes. The things which we had heard were strange enough, but they let in a flood of light upon all the events of the last few months. It was Feurgéres himself who broke in upon our thoughts.

"Gentlemen," he said, "there is another thing which I must tell you."

His voice was very low but firm. He had turned in his chair, and was facing us all. His eyes were no longer vacant. He spoke as one speaks of sacred things.

"All Europe," he said, "was pleased to discuss what was called the elopement of the Princess Isobel with Feurgéres the player. The gutter-press of the world filled their columns with sensational and scandalous lies. We at no time made any reply. There was no need. If now I break the silence of years it is that Isobel shall know the truth. It is you, Mr. Greatson, who will tell her this, and many other things. Listen carefully to what I say. The husband of the Princess Isobel was a blackguard, a man unfit for the society of any self-respecting woman. She was living in misery when I was bidden to the Court of Waldenburg. I was made the more wel-

come there, perhaps, because I myself am a descendant of an ancient and honourable French family. I met the Princess Isobel often, and we grew to love each other. Of the struggle which ensued between her sense of duty and my persuasions I say nothing. She was a highly sensitive and very intellectual woman, and she had a profound conviction of the unalienable right of a woman to live out her life to its fullest capacity, to gather into it to the full all that is best and greatest. Her position at Waldenburg was impossible. I proved it to her. I prevailed. But ——"

He paused, and held up his hand.

"The whole story of our elopement was a lie. There was no elopement. The Princess Isobel left her husband accompanied only by a maid and a lady-in-waiting. They lived quietly in Paris until her husband procured his divorce. Then we were married, but until then we had not met since our parting at Waldenburg. Isobel's mother was ever a pure and holy woman. Let Isobel know that. Let her know that the greatest and most wonderful sacrifice a woman ever made was surely hers — when she denied herself her own daughter lest the merest shadow of shame should rest upon her in later years. It is for that same reason that I myself have kept away from Isobel. I have watched over her always, but at a distance. That is why I am content to stand aside even now and yield up my place to strangers."

It was Arthur again who questioned him.

"Mr. Feurgéres," he said, "you have told us wonderful things about Isobel. You have told us

wonderful things about the past, but you have not spoken at all about the future. Is it your wish that she returns to Waldenburg, or is she to remain Isobel de Sorrens?"

Feurgéres turned his head and looked searchingly at Arthur. The boy's face was flushed with excitement. He made no effort to conceal his great interest. Feurgéres looked at him steadfastly, and it was long before he spoke.

"You are asking me," he said slowly, "the very question which I have been asking myself for a long time. Isobel's proper place is at Waldenburg, and yet there are many and grave reasons why I dread her going there. The King is an old man, the Court is ruled by the Archduchess, a hard, unscrupulous woman. Already she has schemed to get the child into her power. I dread the thought of her there, alone and friendless. Her mother spoke of this to me upon her deathbed. She shrank always from the idea that even the shadow of those hideous calumnies which oppressed her own life should darken a single moment of Isobel's. I believe that if she were here at this moment she would place the two issues before her and bid her take her choice. I think that it is what we must do."

Arthur stood up. He looked very eager and handsome, though a little boyish.

"Monsieur Feurgéres," he said, "I love Isobel. Give her to me, and I will look after her future. I am not rich, but I will make a home for her. She is too old to stay here with us any longer. I will make her happy! Indeed I will!"

Monsieur Feurgéres looked back at that vacant

spot upon the wall, and was silent for some time. It was impossible to gather anything from his face, though Arthur watched him fixedly all the time.

"And Isobel?" he asked at length.

"I have not spoken to her," Arthur said. "There was a compact between us that we should not whilst she was under our care."

Monsieur Feurgéres turned to me.

"That sounds like a compact of your making, Arnold Greatson," he said. "What am I to say to your friend?"

"It is surely," I said, "for Isobel to decide. It is only another issue to be placed before her with those others of which you have spoken. You say that you must leave for St. Petersburg to-morrow. Will you see her now?"

He shook his head. I might almost have imagined him indifferent but for the sudden twitching of his lips, the almost pitiful craving which flashed out for a moment from his deep-set eyes. These were signs which came and went so quickly that I doubt if either of the others observed them. But I at least understood.

"I will not see her at all," he said. "It is better that I should not. If she should decide upon Waldenburg, the less she has seen of me the better. I leave it to you, Arnold Greatson, to put these matters faithfully before Isobel. I claim no guardianship over her. Her mother's sole desire was that when she had reached her present age the whole truth should be placed before her, and she should decide exactly as she thought best. That is my charge upon you," he continued, looking me steadfastly in the face,

"and I know that you will fulfil it. I shall send you my address in case it is necessary to communicate with me."

He rose to his feet, prepared for departure. Arthur intercepted him.

"If Isobel will have me, then," he said, "you will not object?"

"Isobel shall make her own choice of these various issues," he answered. "I claim no guardianship over her at all. If any further decision has to be given, you must look to Mr. Greatson."

Arthur did look at me, but his eyes fell quickly. He turned once more to Monsieur Feurgéres.

"Whether you claim it or not," he said, "you are really her guardian, not Arnold. I shall tell her that you left her free to choose."

"I have said all that I have to say," Monsieur Feurgéres replied. "Except this to you, Mr. Greatson," he added, turning to me. "You can have no longer any hesitation in using the money which stands in Isobel's name at the National Bank. You will find that it has accumulated, and I have also added to it. Isobel will always be reasonably well off, for I have left all that I myself possess to her, with the exception of one legacy."

Without any further form of farewell he passed away from us. It was so obviously his wish to be allowed to depart that we none of us cared to stop him. Then we all three looked at one another.

"To-morrow," Mabane said, "you must tell Isobel."

"Why not to-night?" Arthur interposed.

"Why not to-night, indeed?" Isobel's soft voice

asked. "If, indeed, there is anything more to tell."

We were all thunderstruck as she glided out from behind the screen which shielded the inner door, the door which led to her room. It needed only a single glance into her face to assure us that she knew everything. Her eyes were still soft with tears, shining like stars as she stood and looked at me across the floor; her cheeks were pale, and her lips were still quivering.

"I heard my name," she said. "The door was unfastened, so I stole out. And I think that I am glad I did. I had a right to know all that I have heard. It is very wonderful. I keep thinking and thinking, and even now I cannot realize."

"You heard everything, Isobel?" Arthur exclaimed meaningly.

"Everything!" she answered, her eyes suddenly seeking the carpet. "I thank you all for what you have said and done for me. To-morrow, I think, I shall know better how I feel about these things."

"Quite right, Isobel," Allan said quietly. "There are great issues before you, and you should live with them for a little while. Do not decide anything hastily!"

Arthur pressed forward to her side.

"You will give me your hand, Isobel?" he pleaded. "You will say good-night?"

She gave it to him passively. He raised it to his lips. It was his active pronouncement of himself as her suitor. I watched her closely, and so did Allan. But she gave no sign. She held out her hand to us, too — a cold, sad little hand it felt — and turned

away. There was something curiously subdued about her movements as well as her silence as she passed out of sight.

Arthur took up his hat. He was nervous and uneasy. His tone was almost threatening.

"I shall be here early in the morning," he said. "I suppose you will allow me to see Isobel?"

"By all means," I answered. "As things are now you need not go away unless you like. Your room is still empty. Our compact is at an end. Stay if you will."

He hesitated for a moment, and then threw down his hat. He sank into an easy chair, and covered his face with his hands.

"I 've been a beast, I know!" he half sobbed. "I can't help it. Isobel is everything in the world to me. You fellows can't imagine how I care for her."

I laid my hand upon his shoulder — a little wearily, perhaps, though I tried to infuse some sympathy into my tone.

"Cheer up, Arthur!" I said. "You have your chance. Don't make a trouble of it yet."

Arthur shook his head despondently.

"I think," he said, "that she will go to Waldenburg!"

Book III

CHAPTER I

ARTHUR flung himself into the room pale, hollow-eyed, the picture of despair.

"Any news?" he cried, hopelessly enough, for he had seen my face.

"None," I answered.

"Anything from Feurgéres?"

"Not yet."

"Tell me again — where did you telegraph him?"

"Dover, Calais, Paris, Ostend, Brussels, Cologne!"

"And no reply?"

"As yet none."

"Let us look again at the note you found."

I smoothed it out upon the table. We had read it many times.

"There is something else which I must tell you before I leave England. Come to me at once. The bearer will bring you. Come alone.

"HENRI FEURGÉRES.

"P.S. — You will be back in an hour. Disturb no one. It is possible that I may ask you to keep secret what I have to say."

"This note," I remarked, tapping it with my forefinger, "was taken in to Isobel by Mrs. Burdett at a quarter to eight. It was brought, she said, by a

respectable middle-aged woman, with whom Isobel left the place soon after eight. We heard of this an hour later. At eleven o'clock we began the search for Monsieur Feurgéres. At three, Allan discovered that he had left the *Savoy Hotel* at ten for St. Petersburg. Since then we have sent seven telegrams, the delivery of which is very problematical — and we have heard — nothing!"

Allan laid his hand gently upon my shoulder.

"We may get a reply from Feurgéres at any moment," he said, "but there will be no news of Isobel. That note is a forgery, Arnold."

"I am afraid it is," I admitted. "Feurgéres was a man of his word. He would never have sent for Isobel."

"Then she is lost to us," Arthur groaned.

I caught up my hat and coat.

"Not yet," I said. "I will go and see what Lady Delahaye has to say about this. It can do no harm, at any rate."

"Shall I come?" Arthur asked, half rising from his chair.

"I would rather go alone," I answered.

. . . . . .

The butler, who knew me by sight, was courteous but doubtful.

"Her ladyship has been receiving all the afternoon," he told me, "but I believe that she has gone to her rooms now. Her ladyship dines early to-night because of the opera. I will send your name up if you like, sir."

I walked restlessly up and down the hall for ten minutes. Then a lady's maid suddenly appeared

through a green baize door and beckoned me to follow her.

"Her ladyship will see you upstairs, sir, if you will come this way," she announced.

I followed her into a little boudoir. Lady Delahaye, in a blue dressing-gown, was lying upon a sofa. She eyed me as I entered with a curious smile.

"This is indeed an unexpected pleasure," she murmured. "Do sit down somewhere. It is long past my hour of receiving, and I am just getting ready for dinner, but I positively could not send you away. Now, please, tell me all about it."

"You know why I have come, then?" I remarked.

"My dear man, I have n't the least idea," she protested. "It is sheer unadulterated curiosity which made me send Perkins for you up here. We 're not at all upon the sort of terms, you know," she added, looking up at me with her big blue eyes, "for this sort of thing."

"Isobel left us this morning!" I said bluntly. "She received a note signed Feurgéres, which I am sure was a forgery. She left us at eight o'clock, and she has not returned."

Lady Delahaye looked at me with a faint smile. Her expression puzzled me. I was not even able to guess at the thoughts which lay underneath her words.

"How anxious you must be," she murmured. "Do you know, I always wondered whether Isobel would not some day weary of your milk-and-water Bohemianism. Your Scotch friend is worthy, no doubt, but dull, and the boy was too hopelessly in love to be amusing. And as for you — well — you would do

very nicely, no doubt, my dear Arnold, but you are too stuffed up with principles for a girl of Isobel's antecedents. So she has cut the Gordian knot herself! Well, I am sorry!"

"You are sorry!" I repeated. "Why?"

She smiled sweetly at me.

"Because my dear friend has promised me that wonderful emerald necklace if I could get the child away from you, and I think that very soon, with the help of that stupid boy, I should have succeeded," she said regretfully. "Such emeralds, Arnold! and you know how anything green suits me."

"You do not doubt, then, but that it is the Archduchess who has done this?" I said.

Lady Delahaye lifted her eyebrows.

"Either the Archduchess, or Isobel has walked off of her own sweet will," she remarked calmly. "In any case you have lost the child, and I have lost my necklace. I positively cannot risk losing my dinner too," she added, with a glance at the clock, "so I am afraid — I am so sorry, but I must ask you to go away. Come and see me again, won't you? Perhaps we can be friends again now that this bone of contention is removed."

"I have never desired anything else, Lady Delahaye," I said. "But if my friendship is really of any value to you, if you would care to earn my deepest gratitude, you could easily do so."

"Really! In what manner?"

"By helping me to regain possession of the child."

She laughed at me, softly at first, and then without restraint. Finally she rang the bell.

"My dear Arnold," she exclaimed, wiping her

eyes, "you are really too naïve! You amuse me more than I can tell you. My maid will show you the way downstairs. Do come and see me again soon. Good-bye!"

So that was the end of any hope we may have had of help from Lady Delahaye. I called a hansom outside and drove at once to Blenheim House, the temporary residence of the Archduchess and her suite. A footman passed me on to a more important person who was sitting at a round table in the hall with a visitor's book open before him. I explained to him my desire to obtain a few moments' audience with the Archduchess, but he only smiled and shook his head.

"It is quite impossible for her Highness to see anyone now before her departure, sir," he said. "If you are connected with the Press, I can only tell you what I have told all the others. We have received a telegram from Illghera with grave news concerning the health of his Majesty the King of Waldenburg, and notwithstanding the indisposition of the Princess Adelaide, the Archduchess has arranged to leave for Illghera at once. A fuller explanation will appear in the *Court Circular*, and the Archduchess is particularly anxious to express her great regret to all those whom the cancellation of her engagements may inconvenience. Good-day, sir!"

The man recommenced his task, which was apparently the copying out of a list of names from the visitor's book, and signed to the footman with his penholder to show me out. But I stood my ground.

"You are leaving to-day, then?" I said.

"We are leaving to-day," the man assented, with-

out glancing up from his task. "We are naturally very busy."

"Can I see the Baron von Leibingen?" I asked.

"It is quite impossible, sir," the man answered shortly. "He is engaged with her Highness."

"I will wait!" I declared.

"Then I must trouble you, sir, to wait outside," he said, with a little gesture of impatience. "I do not wish to seem uncivil, but my orders to-day are peremptory."

At that moment a door opened and a man came across the hall, slowly drawing on his gloves. I looked up and saw the Baron von Leibingen. He recognized me at once, and bowed courteously. At the same time there was something in his manner which gave me the impression that he was not altogether pleased to see me.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Greatson?" he asked, pausing for a moment by my side.

"I am anxious to obtain five minutes' interview with the Archduchess," I answered. "If you could manage that for me I should be exceedingly obliged."

He shook his head.

"It is quite impossible!" he said decisively. "You have heard of the serious news from Illghera, without doubt. We shall be on our way there in a few hours."

I drew him a little on one side.

"Is Isobel here, Baron?" I asked bluntly.

"I beg your pardon — is who here?" he inquired, with the air of one who is puzzled by an incomprehensible question.

"Isobel — the Princess Isobel, if you like — has

been lured from our care by a forged message. We know her history now, and we are able to understand the nature of the interest which your mistress has shown in her. Therefore, when I find her missing I come to you. I want to know if she is in this house."

"If she were," the Baron remarked, "I, and everyone else who knows anything about it, would say at once that she was in her proper place. If she were, I should most earnestly advise the Archduchess to keep her here. But I regret to say that she is not. To tell you the truth, the Archduchess is so annoyed at the young lady's refusal to accept her protection, that she has lost all interest in her. I doubt whether she would receive her now if she came."

"Perhaps," I remarked slowly, "she has gone to Illghera."

"It is, of course," the Baron agreed, "not an impossibility."

"If I do not succeed in my search," I said, "it is to Illghera that I shall come."

"You will find it," the Baron assured me, with a smile, "a most charming place. I shall be delighted to renew our acquaintance there."

"His Majesty," I continued, "is, I have heard, very accessible. I shall be able to tell him Isobel's story. You may keep the child away from him, Baron, but you cannot prevent his learning the fact of her existence and her history."

"My young friend," the Baron answered, edging his way towards the door, "your enigmas at another time would be most interesting. But at present I have affairs on hand, and I am pressed for time.

I will permit myself to say, however, that you are altogether deceiving yourself. It was the one wish of the Archduchess to have taken Isobel to her grandfather and begged him to recognize her."

"You decline to meet me fairly, then — to tell me the truth? Mind, I firmly believe that Isobel is now under your control. I shall not rest until I have discovered her."

"Then you may discover, my young friend," the Baron said, putting on his hat, and turning resolutely away, "the true meaning of the word weariness. You are a fool to ask me any questions at all. We are on opposite sides. If I knew where the child was you are the last person whom I should tell. Her place is anywhere — save with you!"

He bowed and turned away, whispering as he passed to a footman, who at once approached me. I allowed myself to be shown out. As a matter of fact, I had no alternative. But on the steps was an English servant in the Blenheim livery. I slipped half a sovereign into his hand.

"Can you tell me what time the Archduchess leaves, and from what station?" I asked.

"I am not quite sure about the time, sir," the man answered, "but the 'buses are ordered from Charing Cross, and they are to be here at eight to-night."

It was already past seven. I lit a cigarette and strolled on towards the station.

CHAPTER II

AT Charing Cross station a strange thing happened. The Continental train arrived whilst I was sauntering about the platform, and out of it, within a few feet of me, stepped Feurgéres. He was pale and haggard, and he leaned heavily upon the arm of his servant as he stepped out of his carriage. When he saw me, however, he held out his hand and smiled.

"You expected me, then?" he exclaimed.

"Not I," I answered. "You have taken my breath away."

"I had your telegram at Brussels," he explained. "I wired St. Petersburg at once, and turned back. Any news?"

"None," I answered.

"What are you doing here?"

I told him in a few rapid words. He listened intently, nodding his head every now and then.

"The Archduchess has her," he said, "and if only one of us had the ghost of a legal claim upon the child our difficulties would end. She is an unscrupulous woman, but there are things which even she dare not do. What are they doing over there?"

He pointed to the next platform. I took him by the arm and dragged him along.

"It is the special!" I exclaimed. "We must see them start."

Red drugget was being stretched across the platform, and to my dismay the barricades were rolled across. The luggage was already in the van, and the guard was looking at his watch. Then a small brougham drove rapidly up and stopped opposite to the saloon. Baron von Leibingen descended, and was immediately followed by the Archduchess. Together they helped from the carriage and across the platform a dark, tall girl, at the first sight of whom my heart began to beat wildly. Then I remembered the likeness between the cousins and what I had heard of the Princess Adelaide's indisposition. She was almost carried into the saloon, and at the last moment she looked swiftly, almost fearfully, around her. I could scarcely contain myself. The likeness was marvellous! As the train steamed out of the station Feurgéres pushed aside the barricade and walked straight up to the station-master.

"I want a special," he said, "to catch the boat. I am Feurgéres, and I am due at Petersburg Wednesday."

The station-master shook his head.

"You can have a special, sir, in twenty minutes, but you cannot catch the boat. The one I have just sent off would never do it, but the boat has a Royal command to wait for her."

"Can't you give me an engine which will make up the twenty minutes?" Feurgéres asked.

"It is impossible, sir," the station-master answered. "We have not an engine built which would come within ten miles an hour of that one."

"Very good," Feurgéres said. "I will have the special, at any rate. Be so good as to give your orders at once."

"You will gain nothing if you want to get on, sir," the station-master remarked. "An ordinary train will leave here in two hours, which will catch the next boat."

"The special in twenty minutes," Feurgéres answered sharply. "Forty pounds, is it not? It is here!"

The station-master hurried away. I scarcely understood Feurgéres' haste to reach Dover. When I told him so he only laughed and led me away towards the refreshment-room. He ordered luncheon baskets to be sent out to the train, and he made me drink a brandy-and-soda. Then he took me by the arm.

"You are not much of a conspirator, my friend, Arnold Greatson," he said. "You have been within a dozen yards of Isobel within the last few minutes, and you have not recognized her."

I stopped short. That wonderful likeness flashed once more back upon my mind. Certainly in the Mordaunt Rooms it had not been so noticeable. And her eyes! I looked at Feurgéres, and he nodded.

"The Princess Adelaide either remains in England or has gone on quietly ahead," he said. "They have dressed Isobel in her clothes, and the general public could never tell the difference. You see how difficult they have made it for us to approach her. They will be hedged around like this all across the Continent. Oh, it was a very clever move!"

I scarcely answered him. My eyes were fixed

upon the tangled wilderness of red and green lights, amongst which that train had disappeared. What had they done to her, these people, that she should scarcely have been able to crawl across the platform? What had they done to make her accept their bidding, and leave England without a word or message to any of us? It had not been of her own choice, I was sure enough of that.

"Come!" Feurgéres said quietly.

I followed him to the platform, where the saloon carriage and engine were already drawn up. Feurgéres brought with him his servant and all his luggage. A few curious porters and bystanders saw us start. No one, however, manifested any particular interest in us. There was no one whose business it seemed to be to watch us.

I sat back in my corner and looked out into the darkness. Feurgéres, opposite to me, was leaning back with half-closed eyes. From his soft, regular breathing it seemed almost as though he slept. For me there was no thought of rest or sleep. I made plans only to discard them, rehearsed speeches, appeals, threats, only to realize their hopeless ineffectiveness. And underneath it all was a dull constant pain, the pain which stays.

Our journey was about three-parts over when Feurgéres suddenly sat up in his seat, and opening his dressing-case, drew out a Continental time-table.

"In a sense that station-master was right," he remarked, turning over the leaves. "We shall not reach Paris any the sooner for taking this special train. On the other hand, we shall have time to

ascertain in Dover whether our friends really have gone on to Calais, or whether they by any chance changed their minds and took the Ostend boat. I sincerely trust that that course will not have presented itself to them."

"Why?" I asked.

"Somewhere on the journey," he remarked, "they must pause. They will have to exchange Isobel for the Princess Adelaide, and make their plans for the disposal of Isobel. If they should do this, say, in Brussels, we shall be at a great disadvantage. If, however, they should stay in Paris, we should be in a different position altogether. The chief of the police is my friend. I am known there, and can command as good service as the Archduchess herself. We must hope that it will be Paris. If so, we shall arrive — let me see, six hours behind them; but supposing they do break their connection, we shall have still five hours in Paris with them before they can get on. If they are cautious they will go to Illghera *viâ* Brussels and their own country. If, however, they do not seriously regard the matter of pursuit they will go direct."

A few moments later we came to a standstill in the town station. Feurgéres let down the window, and talked for a few minutes with the station-master. Then he resumed his seat.

"We will go on to the quay," he said. "It is almost certain that our friends left by the Paris boat. We shall have four hours to wait, but we can secure our cabins, and perhaps sleep."

We moved slowly on to the quay. A few enquiries there completely assured us. Midway across

the Channel, plainly visible still, was a disappearing green light.

"That 's the *Marie Louise*, sir," a seaman told me. "Left here five and twenty minutes ago. The parties you were enquiring about boarded her right enough. The young lady had almost to be carried. She 's the new turbine boat, and she ought to be across in about half an hour from now."

Monsieur Feurgéres engaged the best cabin on the steamer, and his servant fitted me up a dressing-case with necessaries for the journey from his master's ample store. Then we went into the saloon, and had some supper. Afterwards we stood upon deck watching the passengers come on board from the train which had just arrived. Suddenly I seized Feurgéres by the arm and dragged him inside the cabin.

"The Princess Adelaide!" I exclaimed. "Look!"

We saw her distinctly from the window. She was dressed very plainly, and wore a heavy veil which she had just raised. She stood within a few feet of us, talking to the maid, who seemed to be her sole companion.

"Find my cabin, Mason," she ordered. "I shall lie down directly we start. I am always ill upon these wretched night boats. It is a most unpleasant arrangement, this."

Feurgéres looked at me and smiled.

"Isobel's features," he remarked, "but not her voice. You see, we are on the right track. We must contrive to keep out of that young lady's way."

. . . . . .

To keep out of the way of the Princess Adelaide was easy enough, presuming that she kept her word

and remained in her cabin. I watched her enter it and close the door. Afterwards I wrapped myself in an ulster of Feurgéres' and went out on deck. It was a fine night, but windy, and a little dark. I lit a pipe and leaned over the side. I had scarcely been there two minutes when I heard a light footstep coming along the deck and pause a few feet away. A girl's voice addressed me.

"Can you tell me what that light is?"

I knew who it was at once. It was the most hideous ill-fortune. I answered gruffly, and without turning my head.

"Folkestone Harbour!"

I thought that after that she must surely go away. But she did nothing of the sort. She came and leaned over the rail by my side.

"You are Mr. Arnold Greatson, are you not?"

My heart sank, and I could have cursed my folly for leaving my cabin. However, since I was discovered there was nothing to do but to make the best of it.

"Yes, I am Arnold Greatson," I admitted.

"I wonder if you know who I am?" she asked.

"You are the Princess Adelaide of ——"

She held up her hand.

"Stop, please! I see that you know. For some mysterious reason I am travelling almost alone, and under another name which I do not like at all. You are very fond of my cousin, Isobel, are you not, Mr. Greatson?"

I tried to see her face, but it was half turned away from me. Her voice, however, reminded me a little of Isobel's.

"Yes," I admitted slowly. "You see, she was

under our care for some time, and we all grew very fond of her."

"But you — you especially, I mean," she went on. "Do not be afraid of me, Mr. Greatson. I know that my mother is very angry with you, and has tried to take Isobel away, but if I were she I would not come. I think that she must be very much happier as she is."

"I — I am too old," I said slowly, "to dare to be fond of anyone — in that way."

"How foolish!" she murmured. "Do you know, Mr. Greatson, that I am only eighteen, and that I am betrothed to the King of Saxonia. He is over forty, very short, and he has horrid turned-up black moustaches. He is willing to marry me because I am to have a great fortune, and my mother is willing for me to marry him because I shall be a Queen. But that is not happiness, is it?"

"I am afraid not," I answered.

"Mr. Greatson," she continued, "I feel that I can talk to you like this because I have read your books. I like the heroes so much, and of course I like the stories too. I think that Isobel is very wise not to want to come back to Waldenburg. I wish that I were free as she is, and had not to do things because I am a Princess. And I am sure that she is very fond of you."

"Princess ——" I began.

She stopped me.

"If you knew how I hated that word!" she murmured. "I may never see you again, you know, after this evening, so it really does not matter — but would you mind calling me Adelaide?"

"Adelaide, then," I said, "may I ask you a question?"

"As many as you like."

"Do you know where Isobel is now?"

Her surprise was obviously genuine.

"Why, of course not! Is she not at your house in London?"

I shook my head.

"She is a few hours in front of us on her way to Paris," I said, "with your mother and the Baron von Leibingen and the rest of your people. She is travelling in your clothes and in your name. That is why you were left to follow as quietly as possible."

She laid her hand upon my arm. Her eyes were full of tears, and her voice shook.

"Oh, I am so sorry," she cried softly, "so very sorry. Why cannot my mother leave her alone with you? I am sure she would be happier."

"I think so too," I answered. "That is why I am going to try and fetch her back."

She looked at me very anxiously.

"Mr. Greatson," she said, "you do not know my mother. If she makes up her mind to anything she is terribly hard to change. I do hope that you succeed, though. Why ever did Isobel leave you?"

"She received a forged letter, written in somebody else's name," I said. "How your mother has induced her to stay since, though, I do not know. She looked very ill at Charing Cross, and she had to be helped into the train."

The Princess Adelaide went very white.

"It was she I heard this morning — cry out," she murmured. "They told me it was one of the ser-

vants who had had an accident. Mr. Greatson, this is terrible!"

She turned her head away, and I could see that she was crying.

"You must not distress yourself," I said kindly. "I daresay that it will all come right. You will see Isobel, I think, in Paris. If you do, will you give her a message?"

"Of course, I will," she answered.

"Tell her that we are close at hand, and that we have powerful friends," I whispered. "We shall get to see her somehow or other, and if she chooses to return she shall!"

"Yes. Anything else?"

"I think not," I answered.

"Do you not want to send her your love?" she asked, with a faint smile.

"Of course," I said slowly.

She leaned a little over towards me.

"Mr. Greatson," she said, "do you know what I should want you to do if I were Isobel — what I am quite sure that she must want you to do now?"

"Tell me!"

"Why, marry her! She would be quite safe then, would n't she?"

I tried to smile in a non-committal sort of way, but I am afraid there were things in my face beyond my power to control.

"You forget," I answered. "I am thirty-four, and Isobel is only eighteen. Besides, there is someone else who wants to marry Isobel. He is young, and they have been great friends always. I think that she is fond of him."

She shook her head doubtfully.

"I do not think that thirty-four is old at all, and if you care for Isobel, I would not let anyone else marry her," she declared. "Is that Calais?"

"Yes."

"I think that I will go now in case my maid should see us together," she said. "Oh, I can tell you where we are going in Paris. Will that help you?"

"Of course it will," I answered.

"Number 17, Rue Henriette," she whispered. "Please come a little further this way a moment."

I obeyed her at once. We were quite out of sight now, in the quietest corner of the ship.

"Mr. Greatson," she said, "you will think that I am a very strange girl. I am going to be married in a few months to a man I do not care for one little bit, and it seems to me that that will be the end of my life. I want you to marry Isobel, and I hope you will both be very happy — and — will you please kiss me once? I am Isobel's cousin, you know."

I leaned forward and touched her lips. Then I grasped her hands warmly.

"You are very, very kind," I said gratefully, "and you can't think how much happier you have made me feel. If only — you were not a Princess!"

She flitted away into the darkness with a little broken laugh. She passed me half an hour later in the Customs' house with a languid impassive stare which even her mother could not have excelled.

CHAPTER III

FEURGÉRES looked at me in surprise.

"What have you been doing to yourself?" he exclaimed. "Is the fresh air so wonderful a tonic, or have you been asleep and dreaming of Paradise?"

I laughed.

"The sea air was well enough," I answered, "but I have been having a most interesting conversation."

"With whom?" he asked.

"The Princess Adelaide!"

He drew a little closer to me.

"You are serious?"

"Undoubtedly. Listen!"

Then I told him of my conversation with Isobel's cousin, excepting the last episode. His gratification was scarcely equal to mine. He was a little thoughtful for some time afterwards. I am sure he felt that I had been indiscreet.

"The Princess Adelaide," I said, "will not betray us. I am sure of that. She will tell her mother nothing."

"These Waldenburgs," he answered gravely, "are a crafty race. It is in their blood. They cannot help it."

"Isobel is a Waldenburg," I reminded him.

"She is her mother's daughter," he said. "There is always one alien temperament in a family."

"In this case," I declared, "two!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"We shall soon know," he said, "whether this young lady is honest or not. A man will meet us at Paris with an exact record of the doings of the Archduchess and her party. We shall know then where Isobel is. If the address is the same as that given you by the Princess Adelaide, I will believe in her."

"But not till then?" I remarked, smiling.

"Not till then!" he assented.

Before we left Calais, Feurgéres sent more telegrams, and for an hour afterwards he sat opposite to me with wide-open eyes, seeing nothing, as was very evident, save the images created by his own thoughts. As we reached Amiens, however, he spoke to me.

"You had better try and get some sleep," he said. "You may have little time for rest in Paris."

"And you?" I asked.

"It is another matter," he answered. "I am accustomed to sleeping very little; and besides, it is probable that this affair may become one which it will be necessary for you to follow up alone. The sight of me, or the mention of my name, is like poison to all the Waldenburgs. They would only be the more bitter and hard to deal with if they knew that I, too, had joined in the chase. I hope to be able to do my share secretly."

I followed his suggestion, and slept more or less fitfully all the way to Paris. I was awakened to find that the train had come to a standstill. We were already in the station, and as I hastily collected

my belongings I saw that Feurgéres had left me, and was standing on the platform talking earnestly to a pale, dark young Frenchman, sombrely dressed and of insignificant appearance. I joined him just as his companion departed. He turned towards me with a peculiar smile.

"My apologies to the Princess," he said. "The address is correct. They have gone to a suite of rooms belonging to the Baron von Leibingen."

"They are there still, then?" I exclaimed.

"They are there still," Feurgéres assented, "and they show no immediate signs of moving on. They are apparently waiting for someone — perhaps for the Princess Adelaide. Inside the house and out they are being closely watched, and directly their plans are made I shall know of them."

I looked, as I felt, a little surprised. Feurgéres smiled.

"I am at home here," he said, "and I have friends. Come! My own apartments are scarcely a stone's-throw away from the Rue Henriette. Estere will see our things safely through the Customs."

We drove through the cold grey twilight to the Rue de St. Antoine, where Feurgéres' apartments were. To my surprise servants were at hand expecting us, and I was shown at once into a suite of rooms, in one of which was a great marble bath all ready for use. Some coffee and a change of clothes were brought me. All my wants seemed to have been anticipated and provided for. I had always imagined Feurgéres to be a man of very simple and homely tastes, but there were no traces of it in his home. He showed me some of the rooms while we

waited for breakfast, rooms handsomely furnished and decorated, full of art treasures and curios of many sorts collected from many countries.

But, in a sense, it was like a dead house. One felt that it might be a dwelling of ghosts. There were nowhere any signs of the rooms being used, the habitable air was absent. Everything was in perfect order. There was no dust, none of the chilliness of disuse. Yet one seemed to feel everywhere the sadness of places which exist only for their history. One door only remained closed, and that Feurgéres unlocked with a little key which hung from his chain. But he did not invite me to enter.

"You will excuse me for a few moments," he said. "My housekeeper will show you into the breakfast-room. Please do not wait for me."

An old lady, very primly dressed in black, and wearing a curious cap with long white strings, bustled me away. As Feurgéres opened the door of the room, in front of which we had been standing, the air seemed instantly sweet with the perfume of flowers. The old lady sighed as she poured me out some coffee. I am ashamed to say that I felt, and doubtless I looked, curious.

"Would it not be as well for me to wait for Monsieur Feurgéres?" I asked. "He will not be very long, I suppose?"

The old lady shook her head sadly.

"Ah! but one cannot say!" she answered. "Monsieur had better begin his breakfast."

"Your master has perhaps someone waiting to see him?" I remarked.

Madame Tobain — she told me her name — shook

her head once more. She spoke softly, almost as though she were speaking of something sacred.

"Monsieur did not know, perhaps — it was the chamber of Madame. Always Monsieur spends several hours a day there when he is in Paris, and always after he has performed at the theatre he returns immediately to sit there. No one else is allowed to enter; only I, when Monsieur is away, am permitted once a day to fill it with fresh flowers — flowers always the most expensive and rare. Ah, such devotion, and for the dead, too! One finds it seldom, indeed! It is the great artists only who can feel like that!"

She wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron, dropped me a curtsey, and withdrew. Feurgéres came in presently, and I avoided looking at him for the first few minutes. To tell the truth, there was a lump in my own throat. When he spoke, however, his tone was as usual.

"I shall ask you," he said, "to stay indoors, but to be prepared to start away at a moment's notice. I am going to make a few enquiries myself."

His voice drew my eyes to his face, and I was astonished at his appearance. The skin seemed tightly drawn about his cheeks, and he was very white. As though in contradiction to his ill-looks, however, his eyes were unusually brilliant and clear, and his manner almost buoyant.

"Forgive me, Monsieur Feurgéres," I said, "but it seems to me that you had better rest for a while. You have been travelling longer than I have, and you are tired."

He smiled at me almost gaily.

"On the contrary," he declared, "I never felt more vigorous. I——"

He stopped short, and walked the length of the room. When he returned he was very grave, but the smile was still upon his lips. He laid his hand almost affectionately upon my shoulder.

"My dear friend," he said softly, "I think that you are the only one to whom I have felt it possible to speak of the things which lie so near my heart. For I think that you, too, are one of those who know, and who must know, what it is to suffer. We who carry the iron in our hearts, you know, are sometimes drawn together. The things which we may hide from the world we cannot hide from one another. Only for you there is hope, for me there has been the wonderful past. People have pitied me often, my friend, for what they have called my lonely life. They little know! I am not a sentimentalist. I speak of real things. Isobel, my wife, died to the world and was buried. To me she lives always. Just now — I have been with her. She sat in her old chair, and her eyes smiled again their marvellous welcome to me. Only — and this is why I speak to you of these things — there was a difference."

He was silent for a few minutes. When he continued, his voice was a little softer but no less firm.

"Dear friend," he said, "I will be honest. When Isobel was taken from me I had days and hours of hideous agony. But it was the craving for her body only, the touch of her lips, the caress of her hands, the sound of her voice. Her spirit has been with me always. At first, perhaps, her coming was faint and

indefinable, but with every day I realized her more fully. I called her, and she sat in her box and watched me play, and kissed her roses to me. I close the door upon the world and call her back to her room, call her into my arms, whisper the old words, call her those names which she loves best — and she is there, and all my burden of sorrow falls away. My friend, a great love can do this! A great, pure love can mock even at the grave."

I clasped his hand in mine.

"I think," I said, "that I will never pity you again. You have triumphed even over Fate — even over those terrible, relentless laws which sometimes make a ghastly nightmare of life even to the happiest of us. You have turned sorrow into joy. It is a great deed. You have made my own suffering seem almost a vulgar thing."

"Ah, no!" he said, "for you, too, there is hope. You, too, know that we need never be the idle, resistless slaves of Fate — like those others. Will and faith and purity can kindle a magic flame to lighten the darkness of the greatest sorrow. I speak to you of these things — now — because I think that the end is near."

He suddenly sank into a chair. I looked at him in alarm, but his face was radiant. There was no sign of any illness there.

"You are young, Arnold Greatson," he said. "They tell me that you will be famous. Yet you are not one of those to turn your face to the wall because the greatest gift of life is withheld from you. That is why I have lifted the curtain of my own days. I know you, and I know that you will triumph. It

is a world of compensations after all for those who have the wit to understand."

I think that he had more to say to me, but we were interrupted. There was a knock at the door, and the man entered whom I had seen talking with Feurgéres upon the platform of the railway station. Feurgéres rose at once, calm and prepared. They talked for a while so rapidly that I could not follow them. Then he turned to me.

"They are preparing for a move," he announced. "They are going south as though for Marseilles and Illghera, but they insist upon a special train. They have declined a saloon attached to the train de luxe, and Monsieur Estere here has doubts as to their real destination. Wait here until I return. Be prepared for a journey."

. . . . . .

They left me alone. I lit a cigarette and settled down to read. In less than half an hour, however, I was disturbed. There was a knock at the door, and Madame Tobain entered.

"There is a lady here, sir, who desires to see Monsieur!" she announced.

A fair, slight woman in a long travelling cloak brushed past her. She raised her veil, and I started at once to my feet. It was Lady Delahaye.

CHAPTER IV

IT did not need a word from Lady Delahaye to acquaint me fully with what had happened. Indeed, my only wonder had been that this knowledge had not come to her before. She greeted me with a smile, but her face was full of purpose.

"Where is he?" she asked simply.

"Not here," I answered.

She seated herself, and began to unpin the travelling veil from her hat.

"So I perceive," she remarked. "He will return?"

"Yes," I admitted, "he will return."

She folded the veil upon her knee and looked across at me thoughtfully.

"What an idiot I have been!" she murmured. "After all, that emerald necklace might easily have been mine."

"I am not so sure about that," I answered. "I think I know what is in your mind, but I might remind you that suspicion is one thing and proof another."

"The motive," she answered, "is the difficult thing, and that is found. I suppose the police are good for something. They should be able to work backwards from a certainty."

"Are you," I asked, "going to employ the police? Don't you think that, for the good of everyone, and

even for your husband's own sake, the thing had better remain where it is?"

She laughed scornfully.

"You would have me let the man go free who shot another in the back treacherously and without warning?" she exclaimed. "Thank you for your advice, Arnold Greatson. I have a different purpose in my mind."

I moved my chair and drew a little nearer to her.

"Lady Delahaye —" I began.

"The use of my Christian name," she murmured, "would perhaps make your persuasions more effective. At any rate, you might try. I have never forbidden you to use it."

"If you have any regard for me at all, then, Eileen," I said, "you will think seriously before you take any steps against Monsieur Feurgéres. Remember that he had, or thought he had, very strong reasons for acting as he did. Looking at it charitably, your husband's proceedings were open to very grave misconstruction. There will be a great deal of unpleasant scandal if the story is raked up again, and Isobel's whole history will be told in court. How will that suit the Archduchess?"

"Not at all," Lady Delahaye admitted frankly; "but the Archduchess is not the only person to be considered. You seem to forget that this is no trifling matter. It is a murderer whom you are shielding, the man who killed my husband whom you would have me let go free."

"Technically," I admitted, "not actually. Your husband did not die of his wound. He was in a very bad state of health."

"I cannot recognize the distinction," Lady Delahaye declared coldly. "He died from shock following it."

"Consider for a moment the position of Monsieur Feurgéres," I pleaded. "Isobel was the only child of the woman whom he had dearly loved. The care of her was a charge upon his conscience and upon his honour. Any open association with him he felt might be to her detriment later on in life. All that he could do was to watch over her from a distance. He saw her, as he imagined, in danger. What course was open to him? Forget for the moment that Major Delahaye was your husband. Put yourself in the place of Feurgéres. What could he do but strike?"

"He broke the law," she said coldly, "the law of men and of God. He must take the consequences. I am not a vindictive woman. I would have forgiven him for making a scene, for striking my husband, or taking away the child by force. But he went too far."

"Have you," I asked, "been to the police?"

"Not yet."

I caught at this faint hope.

"You came here to see him first? You have something to propose — some compromise?"

She shook her head slowly.

"Between Monsieur Feurgéres and myself," she said, "there can be no question of anything of the sort. There is nothing which he could offer me, nothing within his power to offer, which could influence me in the slightest."

"Then why," I asked, "are you here?"

"To see you," she answered. "I want to ask you

this, Arnold. You wish Monsieur Feurgéres to go free. You wish to stay my hand. What price are you willing to pay?"

I looked at her blankly. As yet her meaning was hidden from me.

"Any price!" I declared.

Then she leaned over towards me.

"What is he to you, Arnold — this man?" she asked softly. "You are wonderfully loyal to some of your friends."

"I know the story of his life," I answered, "and it is enough. Besides, he is an old man, and I fancy that his health is failing. Let him end his days in peace. You will never regret it, Eileen. If my gratitude is worth anything to you ——"

"I want," she interrupted, "more than your gratitude."

We sat looking at each other for a moment in a silence which I for my part could not have broken. I read in her face, in her altered expression, and the softened gleam of her eyes, all that I was expected to read. I said nothing.

"It is not so very many years, Arnold," she went on, "since you cared for me, or said that you did. I have not changed so much, have I? Give up this senseless pursuit of a child. Oh, you guard your secret very bravely, but you cannot hide the truth from me. It is not all philanthropy which has made you such a squire of dames. You believe that you care for her — that child! Arnold, it is a foolish fancy. You belong to different hemispheres; you are twice her age. It will be years before she can even realize what life and love may be. Give it all

up. She is in safe hands now. Come back to London with me, and Monsieur Feurgéres shall go free."

"Monsieur Feurgéres, Madame, thanks you!"

He had entered the room softly, and stood at the end of the screen. Lady Delahaye's face darkened.

"May I ask, sir, how long you have been playing the eavesdropper?" she demanded.

"Not so long, Madame, as I should have desired," he answered, "yet long enough to understand this. My young friend here seems to be trying to bargain with you for my safety. Madame, I cannot allow it. If your silence is indeed to be bought, the terms must be arranged between you and me."

She looked at him a trifle insolently.

"I have already explained to Mr. Greatson," she remarked, "that bargaining between you and me is impossible because you have nothing to offer which could tempt me."

"And Mr. Greatson has?"

"That, Monsieur," she answered, "is between Mr. Greatson and myself."

Monsieur Feurgéres stood his ground.

"Lady Delahaye," he said, "I want you to listen to me for a moment. It is not a justification which I am attempting. It is just a word or two of explanation, to which I trust you will not refuse to listen."

"If you think it worth while," she answered coldly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Who can tell! I have the fancy, however, to assure you that what took place that day at the Café Grand was not the impulsive act of a man inspired

with a homicidal mania, but was the necessary outcome of a long sequence of events. You know the peculiar relations existing between Isobel and myself. I had not the right to approach her, or to assume any overt act of guardianship. Any association with me would at once have imperilled any chance she may have possessed of being restored to her rightful position at Waldenburg. I accordingly could only watch over her by means of spies. This I have always done."

"With what object, Monsieur Feurgéres?" Lady Delahaye asked. "You could never have interfered."

"The care of Isobel — the distant care of her — was a charge laid upon me by her mother," Feurgéres answered. "It was therefore sacred. I trusted to Fate to find those who might intervene where I dared not, and Fate sent me at a very critical moment Mr. Arnold Greatson. Lady Delahaye, to speak ill of a woman is no pleasant task — to speak ill of the dead is more painful still. Yet these are facts. The Archduchess was willing to go to any lengths to prevent Isobel's creditable and honourable appearance in Waldenburg. It was the Archduchess who, after what she has termed her sister's disgrace, sent Isobel secretly to the convent, and your husband, Lady Delahaye, who took her there. It was your husband who brought her away, and it was the announcement of his visit to the convent, and an ill-advised confidence to a friend at his club in Paris, which brought me home from America. I will only say that I had reason to suspect Major Delahaye as the guardian of Isobel — even the Archduchess was ignorant of the position which he had assumed.

Since I became a player there are many who forget that my family is noble. Major Delahaye was one of these. He returned a letter which I wrote to him with a contemptuous remark only. My friend the Duc d'Autrien saw him on my behalf. From him your husband received a second and a very plain warning. He disregarded it. Once more I wrote. I warned him that if he took Isobel from the convent he went to his death. That is all!"

There was a silence. Lady Delahaye was very pale. She looked imploringly at me.

"Monsieur Feurgéres," she said, "I am not your judge. I do not wish to seem vindictive. Will you leave me with Mr. Greatson for a few minutes?"

"Madame, I cannot," he answered gravely. "Apart from the fact that I decline to have my safety purchased for me, especially by one to whom I already owe too much, it is necessary that Mr. Greatson leaves this house within the next quarter of an hour."

I sprang to my feet. I forgot Lady Delahaye. I forgot that this man's life and freedom rested at her disposal. The great selfishness was upon me.

"I am ready!" I exclaimed.

Lady Delahaye looked, and she understood. Slowly she rose to her feet and crossed the room towards the door. I was tongue-tied. I made no protest — asked no questions. Feurgéres opened the door for her and summoned his servant, but no word of any sort passed between them. Then he turned suddenly to me. His tone was changed. He was quick and alert.

"Arnold," he said, "the rest is with you. They are taking her to the convent. Madame Richard is

here, and the Cardinal de Vaux. They have a plot — but never mind that. If she passes the threshold of the convent she is lost. It is for you to prevent it."

"I am ready!" I cried.

He opened a desk and tossed me a small revolver.

"Estere waits below in the carriage. He will drive with you to the station. You take the ordinary express to Marcon. There an automobile waits for you, and you must start for the convent. The driver has the route. Remember this. You must go alone. You must overtake them. Use force if necessary. If you fail — Isobel is lost!"

"I shall not fail!" I answered grimly.

"Bring her back, Arnold," he said, with a sudden change in his tone. "I want to see her once more."

I left him there, and glancing upwards from the street as the carriage drove off, I waved my hand to the slim black figure at the window, whose wan, weary eyes watched our departure with an expression which at the time I could not fathom. It was not until I was actually in the train that I remembered what Lady Delahaye's silent departure might mean for him.

CHAPTER V

OUR plans were skilfully enough laid, but the Archduchess also had missed nothing. We rushed through the village of Argueil without having seen any sign of the carriage, and it was not until we had reached the vineyard-bordered road beyond that we saw it at last climbing the last hill to the convent.

"Shall we catch it?" I gasped.

The *chauffeur* only smiled.

"Monsieur may rest assured," he answered, changing into his fourth speed, notwithstanding the slight ascent.

Half-way up the hill we were barely one hundred yards behind. The man glanced at me for instructions.

"Blow your horn," I said.

He obeyed. The carriage drew to the side of the road. We rushed by, and I caught a glimpse of three faces. My spirits rose. There was only the Baron to deal with. Madame Richard and Isobel were the other occupants of the carriage.

"Stop, and draw the car across the road!" I ordered.

The man obeyed. I sprang to the ground. The Baron had his head out of the window, and the driver was flogging his horses.

"If you do not stop," I called out, "I shall shoot your horses."

The driver took no notice. He had flogged his horses into a gallop, and was coming straight at me. I fired, and one of the horses, after a wild plunge came down, dragging the other with him, and breaking the pole. The driver was thrown on to the top of them and rolled off into the hedge, cursing volubly. The Baron leaned out of the window, and he had something in his hand which gleamed like silver in the sunlight.

"I have had enough of you, my young friend," he said fiercely, and instantly fired.

An unseen hand struck his arm as he pulled the trigger. I felt my hat quiver upon my head as I sprung forward. The Baron had no time to fire again. I caught him by the throat and dragged him into the road.

"I have had more than enough of you, you blackguard," I muttered, and I shook him till he groaned, and threw him across the road.

Isobel stretched out her arms to me — Isobel herself, but how pale and changed!

"Arnold, Arnold, take me away!" she moaned.

I would have lifted her out, but Madame Richard had seized her.

"The child is vowed," she said. "You shall not touch her. She belongs to God."

"Then give her to me," I cried, "for I swear she is nearer to Heaven in my arms than yours."

The woman's black eyes flashed terrible things at me, and she wound herself round Isobel with a marvellous strength. For a moment I was helpless.

"Madame," I said, "I have never yet raised my hand against a woman, but if you do not release that girl this moment I shall have to forget your sex."

"Never!" she shrieked. "Help! Baron! Cocher!"

Some blue-bloused men looked up from their work in the vineyards a long way off. It was no time for hesitation. I set my teeth, and I caught hold of the woman's arms. Her bones cracked in my hands before she let go. Isobel at last was free!

"Jump up and get in the automobile, Isobel!" I said. "Bear up, dear! It is only for a moment now."

Half fainting she staggered out and groped her way across the road. Once she nearly fell, but my *chauffeur* leaped down and caught her. Then Madame Richard looked in my eyes and cursed me with slow, solemn words.

I sprang away from her. She followed. I jumped into the automobile. She stood in front of it and dared us to start. The driver backed a little, suddenly shot forward, and with a wonderful curve avoided her. She ran to meet the peasants who were streaming now across the fields. We could hear for a few minutes her shrill cries to them. Then the vineyards became patchwork, and the still air a rushing wind. Our *chauffeur* sat grim and motionless, like a figure of fate, and we did our forty miles an hour.

"You have orders?" I asked him once.

"But yes, Monsieur," he answered. "We go to Paris — and avoid the telegraph offices."

All the while Isobel was only partially conscious. Gradually, however, her colour became more natural,

and at last she opened her eyes and smiled at me. Her fingers faintly pressed mine. She said nothing then, but in about half an hour she made an effort to sit up.

"Dear Arnold," she murmured, "you are indeed my guardian. Oh ——"

She broke off, and shuddered violently.

"Please don't try to talk yet," I said. "I should n't have been much of a guardian, should I, if I had n't fetched you out of this scrape? Besides, it was Monsieur Feurgéres who planned everything."

"Arnold," she murmured, "I — have n't eaten anything for some time. They put things in my food to make me drowsy, so I dared not."

Under my breath I made large demands upon my stock of profanity. Then I leaned over and spoke to the *chauffeur*. We were passing through a small town, and he at once slackened pace and pulled up at a small restaurant. With the first mouthful of soup Isobel's youth and strength seemed to reassert themselves. After a cutlet and a glass of wine she had colour, and began to talk. She even grumbled when I denied her coffee, and hurried her off again. In the automobile she came close to my side, and with a shyness quite new to her linked her arm in mine. So we sped once more on our way to Paris.

Conversation, had Isobel been fit for it, was scarcely possible. But in a disjointed sort of way she tried to tell me things.

"I was inside the house," she said, "and the door of the room was locked before I knew that Monsieur Feurgéres was not there — that the letter was not a true one. My aunt came and talked to me. She tried

to be kind at first. Afterwards she was very angry. She said that my grandfather was an old man, that he wished to see me before he died. I must go with her at once. I said that I would go if I might see you first, but that only made her more angry still. She said that my life had been a disgrace to our family, that I must not mention your name, that I must speak as though I had just left the convent. Then I, too, lost my temper. I said that I would not go to Illghera. I did not want to see my grandfather, or any of my relations. They had left me alone so many years that now I could do without them altogether. She never interrupted me. She looked at me all the time with a still, cold smile. When I had finished she said only, 'We shall see,' and she left me alone. They brought me food, and after I had taken some of it I was ill. After that everything seemed like a dream. I simply moved about as they told me, and I did not seem to care much what happened. Then in Paris Adelaide came into my room. She brought me some chocolate, and she told me that you were near. I think that I should have died but for her. I began to listen to what they said. I found out that they never meant to take me to Illghera. It was the convent all the time. Adelaide brought me more chocolate, and kissed me. Then I made up my mind to fight. I would not take their food. I told myself all the time that I was not ill — I would not be ill. That is why I was able to look out for you, to strike at the Baron when he tried to shoot you, and to walk by myself. Arnold, why does my aunt hate me so?"

I did not answer her, for even as she talked her

voice grew fainter and fainter, and in a moment or two she was in a dead sleep. Her head fell upon my shoulder, her hand rested in mine. So she remained until we reached the outskirts of Paris. Then the noise of passing vehicles, and the altered motion of the car over the large cobble-stones woke her. She pressed my arm.

"I am safe, Arnold?" she murmured, with a shade of anxiety still in her tone.

"Quite," I assured her.

In a few moments we turned into the Rue de St. Antoine and drew up before Monsieur Feurgéres' house. In the hall we met Tobain. I could see that she had been weeping, and her tone, as she took me a little on one side, was full of anxiety.

"Monsieur," she murmured, "I am afraid ——"

I stopped her.

"The young lady first," I said. "She has been ill. Where shall I take her?"

She threw open the door of the dining-room. A small round table, elegantly appointed, was spread with such a supper as Feurgéres knew well how to order. There was a gold foiled bottle, flowers, salads and fruits. Tobain nodded vigorously as she drew up a chair for Isobel.

"It was Monsieur himself who ordered everything," she exclaimed. "He was so particular that everything should be of the best, and the wine he fetched himself."

"Where is Monsieur Feurgéres?" I asked, struck by some note of hidden feeling in her tone.

"I will take you to him," she answered, "if Mademoiselle will wait here."

In the hall she no longer concealed her fears.

"Monsieur," she said, "I am afraid. Soon after you had left, and the master had given his orders for the supper, he called me to him. He was standing before the door of Madame's chamber, the room which it is not permitted to enter, and his hands and arms were full of flowers. He had been to the florists himself, I knew, for there were more than usual. 'Tobain,' he said, 'always, as you know, I lock the door of this room when I enter. To-day I shall not do so. But you must understand that no one is permitted to enter but my friend, Mr. Arnold Greatson, who will return this evening. Those are my orders, Tobain.' 'But, Monsieur, dejeuner?' 'Remember, Tobain — Mr. Arnold Greatson only.' Then I caught a glimpse of his face, Monsieur, and I was afraid. I have been afraid ever since. It was the face of a young man, so brilliant, so eager. I was at my master's marriage, and the look was there then. He went in and he closed the door, and since then, Monsieur, I have heard no sound, and many hours have passed. Monsieur will please enter quickly."

For myself, I shared, too, Tobain's nameless apprehensions. I left her, and knocked softly at the door. There was no answer. So I entered.

The room was in darkness, but the opening of the door touched a spring under the carpet, and several heavily-shaded electric lamps filled the apartment with a soft dim light. Monsieur Feurgéres was sitting opposite to me, his eyes closed, a faint smile upon his lips. He had the air of a man who slept with a good conscience, and whose dreams were of the pleasantest. Close drawn to his was another chair, against

which he leaned somewhat, and over the arm of which one hand was stretched, resting gently upon the soft mass of deep pink roses, whose perfume made fragrant the whole room. I spoke to him.

"Monsieur Feurgéres," I cried, "it is done. I have brought Isobel. She is here."

There was no answer. Had I, indeed, expected any, I could almost have believed that the smile, so light and delicate a thing, which quivered upon his pale lips, deepened a little as I spoke. But that, of course, was fancy, for Monsieur Feurgéres had won his heart's desire. Softly, and with fingers which felt almost sacrilegious, I broke off one of the blossoms with which the empty chair was laden, and with it in my hands I went back to Isobel.

CHAPTER VI

ISOBEL knew the whole truth. I told her one evening — the only one on which we two had dined out together alone. I think that the weather had tempted me to this indulgence, which I had up to now so carefully avoided. An early summer, with its long still evenings, had driven us out of doors. The leaves which rustled over our heads, stirred by the faintest of evening breezes, made sweeter music for us than the violins of the more fashionable restaurants, and no carved ceiling could be so beautiful as the star-strewn sky above. I omitted nothing. I laid the whole situation before her. When I had finished, she was very white and very quiet.

"And now that you have told me all this," she asked, after a long silence, "does it remain for me to make my choice? Even now I do not see my way at all clearly. My relations do not want me. Monsieur Feurgéres has left me some money. Cannot I choose for myself how I shall spend my life?"

"I am afraid," I answered, "that you may not. For my part I am bound to say, Isobel, that I think Monsieur Feurgéres was right. The letter of which I have told you, and which I found in my room, was written only a few hours before his death. At such

a time a man sees clearly. You are not only yourself the Princess Isobel of Waldenburg, but you have a grandfather who has never recovered the loss of your mother and of you. It was not his fault or by his wish that you were sent away from Waldenburg. He has been deceived all the time by your aunt the Archduchess. I think that it is your duty to go to him."

"You will come with me?" she murmured anxiously.

"I shall not leave you," I answered slowly, "until you are in his charge. But afterwards ——"

"Well?" she interrupted anxiously.

"Afterwards," I said, firmly keeping my eyes away from her and bracing myself for the effort, "our ways must lie apart, Isobel. You are the daughter of one of Europe's great families, you have a future which is almost a destiny. You must fulfil your obligations."

I saw the look in her face, and my heart ached for her. I leaned forward in my chair.

"Dear child," I said, "remember that this is what your mother would have wished. Monsieur Feurgéres believed this before he died, and I think that no one else could tell so well what she would have desired for you. Just now it may seem a little hard to go amongst strangers, to begin life all over again at your age. But, after all, we must believe that it is the right thing."

Her face was turned away from me, but I could see that her cheeks were pale and her lips trembling. She said nothing, I fancied because she dared not trust her voice. Above the tops of the trees the

yellow moon was slowly rising; from a few yards away came all the varied clatter of the Boulevard. And around us little groups and couples of people were gay — gay with the invincible, imperishable gaiety of the Frenchman who dines. The white-aproned waiters smiled as with deft hands they served a different course, or with a few wonderful touches removed all traces of the repast, and served coffee and liqueurs upon a spotless cloth. And amidst it all I watched with aching heart Isobel, the child of to-day, the woman of to-morrow, as she fought her battle.

Her face seemed marble-white in the strange light, half natural, half artificial. When she spoke at last she still kept her face turned away from me.

"The right thing!" she murmured. "That is what I want to do. I want to do what she would have wished. But just now it seems a little hard. I do not want to be a princess. I do not want to be rich. Monsieur Feurgéres has made me independent, and that is all I desire. I would like to be free to live always my own life — free like you and Allan, who paint and write and think, for I, too, would love so much to be an artist. But it seems that all these things have been decided for me — by you and Monsieur Feurgéres. No," she added quickly, "I know very well that you are right. I am willing to do what Monsieur Feurgéres thinks that my mother would have wished. I will go to my grandfather, and if he wishes it I will stay with him. But there will be a condition!"

She turned at last and looked at me. The lines of her mouth had altered, the carriage of her head,

a subtle change in her tone, told their own story. It was the Princess Isobel who spoke.

"I will not have my mother ignored or spoken of as one who forgot her rank and station. These are all very well, but they are trifles compared with the great things of life. I am proud of my mother's courage, I am proud of the love which made his life, after she had gone, so beautiful. I know that you understand me, Arnold, but I do not think that those others will. They must bear with me, or I shall not stay."

I looked at her wonderingly. It seemed to me so strange that, under our very eyes, the child whom I had led by the hand through Covent Garden on that bright Spring morning should have developed in thought and mind under our own roof, and with so little conscious instruction, into a woman of perceptions and character. Somewhere the seed of these things must have lain hidden. One knows so little, after all, of those whom one knows best.

"It is a fair condition, Isobel," I said. "You are going into a world which is hedged about with conventions and prejudices. The things which are so clear to you and to me, they may look at differently. You must be received as your mother's daughter, and not as the King's granddaughter."

She nodded gravely. Then she leaned across the table and looked into my eyes. Notwithstanding her pallor and her black dress, I was forced to realize what I ever forbade my thoughts to dwell upon — her great and increasing beauty. She looked into my eyes, and my heart stood still.

"Arnold," she murmured, "shall you miss me?"

My heel dug into the turf beneath my foot. My eyes fell from hers. I dared not look at her.

"We shall all miss you so much," I said gravely, "that life will never be the same again to us. You made it beautiful for a little time, and your absence will be hard to bear. I suppose we shall all turn to hard work," I added, with an attempt at lightness. "Allan will paint his great picture, Arthur will invent a new motor and make his fortune, and I shall write my immortal story."

"The story," she said, "which you would not show me?"

Show her! How could I, when I knew that for one who read between the lines the story of my own suffering was there? My secret had been hard enough to keep faithfully, even from her to whom the truth, had she ever divined it, must have seemed so incredible.

"That one, perhaps," I answered lightly, "or the next! Who can tell? One is never a judge of one's own work, you know."

"Why would you not show me that story, Arnold?" she asked softly.

I met her eyes fixed upon me with a peculiar intentness. I tried to escape them, but I could not. It was impossible for me to lie to her. My voice shook as I answered her.

"Don't ask me, Isobel!" I said. "We all make mistakes sometime, you know. Not to show you that story when you asked me was one of mine."

"If you had it here ——?"

"If I had it here I would show it you," I declared.

She sighed. She did not seem altogether satisfied.

"Sometimes, Arnold," she said thoughtfully, "you puzzle me very much. You treat me always as though I were a child; you keep me at arm's length always, as though there were between us some impassable barrier, as though it could never be possible for you to come into my world or for me to pass into yours. I know that you are wiser and cleverer than I am, but I can learn. I have been learning all the time. Are we always to remain at this great distance?"

"Dear Isobel," I answered, "you forget that I am more than twice your age. You are eighteen, and I am thirty-four. I cannot make myself young like you. I cannot call back the years, however much I might wish to do so. And for the rest, I have been your guardian. I, a poor writer of no particular family and very meagre fortune, and you my ward, a princess standing at the opposite pole of life. I have had to remember these things, Isobel."

She leaned a little further across the table. Again her eyes held mine, and I felt my heart beat like a boy's at the touch of her soft white fingers as she laid her hand on mine.

"I wish," she murmured, "oh, I wish ——"

"So we 've found you at last, have we?"

Isobel's speech was never ended. Mabane and Arthur stood within a few feet of us, the former grave, the latter white and angry. I rose slowly to my feet and held out my hand to Allan.

"I am glad to see you, Allan!" I said.

He looked first at my hand, and afterwards at me. Then, with a sigh of relief, he took it and nearly wrung it off.

"And I can't tell you how glad I am to see you

both again!" he exclaimed. "We've heard strange stories — or rather Arthur has — from his friend Lady Delahaye, and at last we decided to come over and find out all about it for ourselves. Don't take any notice of Arthur," he added under his breath, "he's not quite himself."

Arthur was standing with his back to me, talking to Isobel. Certainly her welcome was flattering enough. I realized with a sudden gravity that I had not heard her laugh like this since she had been in England. Arthur continued talking in a low, earnest tone.

"How did you find us?" I asked Allan.

"We called at the Rue de St. Antoine," he answered. "The housekeeper said that she had heard you talk about dining at one of these places. Arnold?"

"Well?"

"Why are you and Isobel staying on in Paris?"

"First of all," I answered promptly, "we had to stay for the funeral, and now there are some legal formalites which cannot be finished until to-morrow. I am Monsieur Feurgéres' executor, Allan, and he has left me twenty thousand pounds. Isobel has the rest."

"I am delighted, old chap," Mabane declared heartily. "In fact, I'll drink your health."

I called a waiter and ordered liqueurs. Arthur took his with an ill grace, and he still avoided any direct speech with me. Isobel was evidently uneasy, and looked at me once or twice as though anxious that I should break up their *tête-à-tête*. But when I had paid the bill and we rose to go, Allan passed his

arm through mine, and I was forced to let the two go on.

"Let the boy have his chance," Allan said, pausing a little as we turned into the Boulevard. "He's in such a state that he won't listen to reason only from her."

"But," I protested, "it is absurd for him to speak to her. Does he know who she is? The Princess Isobel of Waldenburg! Their little kingdom is small enough, but they play at royalty there."

Allan nodded.

"He knows. But he's a good-looking boy, and the girls have spoilt him a little. He has an idea that she cares for him."

"Impossible!" I declared, sharply.

"No! Not impossible!" Allan answered, shaking his head. "They have been together a great deal, you must remember, and Arthur can be a very delightful companion when he chooses. No, it is n't impossible, Arnold."

I shook my head.

"Isobel's future is already arranged," I said. "In three days' time I am taking her to her grandfather. If he receives her, as I believe that he will receive her, she will pass out of our lives as easily as she came into them. She will marry a grand duke, perhaps even a petty king. She will be plunged into all manner of excitements and gaiety. Her years with us will never be mentioned at Court. She herself will soon learn to look back on them as a quaint episode."

"You do not believe it, Arnold?" Mabane declared scornfully.

"Heaven only knows what I believe," I answered, with a little burst of bitterness. "Look at that!"

We had reached the Rue de St. Antoine. Isobel stood in the doorway at the apartments waiting for us. But Arthur had already disappeared.

CHAPTER VII

I EXAMINED the tickets carefully and placed them in my pocket-book. Then I paused to light a cigarette on my way out of the office, and almost immediately felt a hand upon my arm. I looked at first at the hand. It was feminine and delicately gloved. Then I looked upwards into the blue eyes of Lady Delahaye.

"Abominable!" she murmured. "You are not glad to see me!"

I raised my hat.

"The Boulevard des Italiennes," I said, "has never seemed to me to be a place peculiarly suitable for the display of emotion."

"Come and try the Rue Strelitz," she answered, smiling.

I glanced down at her. She was gowned even more perfectly than usual — Parisienne to the finger-tips. She had too all the delightful confidence of a woman who knows that she is looking her best.

I smiled back at her. It was impossible to take her seriously.

"Your invitation," I said, "sounds most attractive. But I am curious to know what would happen to me in the Rue Strelitz. Should I be offered poison in a jewelled cup, or disposed of in a cruder fashion?

Let me make my will first, and I will come. I am really curious!"

"Arnold," she said, looking up at me with very bright eyes, "you are brutal."

"Not quite that, I hope," I protested.

"Let me tell you something," she continued.

We were in rather a conspicuous position. Lady Delahaye seemed suddenly to realize it.

"May I beg for your escort a little way?" she said. "I am not comfortable upon the Boulevard alone."

"You could scarcely fail," I remarked, throwing away my cigarette, "to be an object of attention from the Frenchman, who is above all things a judge of your sex. I will accompany you a little way with pleasure. Shall we take a fiacre?"

"I would rather walk," she answered. "Do you mind coming this way? I will not take you far."

"I have two whole unoccupied hours," I assured her, "which are very much at your service."

"Where, then," she asked, "is Isobel?"

"Shopping with Tobain," I answered.

"Are you not afraid," she asked with a smile, "to send her out alone with Tobain?"

"Not in the least," I answered. "Monsieur Feurgéres' only friend in Paris was the chief commissioner of police, and he has been good enough to take great interest in us. Isobel is well watched."

"I wonder," she said, after a moment's pause, "whether you have still any faith in me!"

"My dear lady!"

"I wish I could make you believe me. The — her Highness — she prefers us here to call her

Madame — has relinquished altogether her designs against you. She desires an alliance."

"Is this," I asked, "an invitation to me to join in the spoils? Am I to become murderer, or poisoner, or abductor, or what?"

Lady Delahaye bit her lip.

"You are altogether too severe," she said. "Madame simply realizes that she has been mistaken. She is willing for Isobel to be restored to her grandfather. It will mean a million or so less dowry for Adelaide, but that must be faced. Madame desires to make peace with you."

"I am charmed," I answered. "May I ask exactly what this means?"

Lady Delahaye smiled up at me.

"The Archduchess will explain to you herself," she said. "I am taking you to her."

I slackened my pace.

"I think not," I said. "To tell you the truth, the Archduchess terrifies me. I see myself inveigled into a room with a trap-door, or knocked on the head by hired bullies, and all manner of disagreeable things. No, Lady Delahaye, I think that I will not run the risk."

She laughed softly.

"I know that you will come," she said softly.

"And why?" I asked.

"Because you are a man, and you do not know fear!"

I raised my hat and proceeded.

"My head is turned," I said. "Nothing flatters a coward so much as the imputation of bravery. I think that I shall go with you anywhere."

"Even — to the Rue Strelitz?"

"My courage may fail me at the last moment," I answered. "At present it feels equal even to the Rue Strelitz."

Again she laughed.

"You are a fraud, Arnold," she declared. "As if we did not know — I and Madame and all of us, that in Paris, even throughout France, you could walk safely into any den of thieves you choose. Your courage is n't worth a snap of the fingers. Any man can be brave who has the archangels of Dotant at his elbows."

"What an easily pricked reputation," I answered regretfully. "Well, it is true. Dotant was Feurgéres' greatest friend, and even Isobel might walk the streets of Paris alone and in safety. Hence, I presume, the amiable desire of the Archduchess for an alliance."

Lady Delahaye shrugged her lace-clad shoulders.

"My dear Arnold," she said, "for myself I adore candour, and why should I try and deceive you? Madame has played a losing game, and knows it. She has the courage to admit defeat. She can still offer enough to make an alliance desirable. For instance, those tickets in your pocket for Illghera will take you there, it is true, but they will not take you into the presence of the King."

"The King," I remarked pensively, "leads a retired life."

"He does," Lady Delahaye answered. "He has the greatest objection to visitors, and for a stranger to obtain an audience is almost an impossibility. He never leaves the grounds of the villa, and his

secretary, who opens all his letters, is — a friend of Madame's."

"You have put your case admirably," I remarked. "If Madame is sincere, I should at least like to hear what she has to say."

Lady Delahaye drew a little sigh of content.

"At last," she exclaimed, "I do believe that you are going to behave like a reasonable person."

I could not refrain from the natural retort.

"I have an idea," I said, "that up to now my actions have been fairly well justified."

We were mounting the steps of her house. She looked round and raised her eyebrows.

"We must let bygones be bygones!" she said. "Madame has declared that henceforth she adjures all intrigue."

A footman took my hat and stick in the hall. Lady Delahaye led me into a small boudoir leading out of a larger room. She herself only opened the door and closed it, remaining outside. I was alone with the Archduchess.

She rose slowly to her feet, a very graceful and majestic-looking person, with a suggestion of Isobel in her thin neck and the pose of her head. She did not hold out her hand, and she surveyed me very critically. I ventured to bestow something of the same attention upon her. She was certainly a very beautiful woman, and her expression by no means displeasing. She had Isobel's dark blue eyes, and there was a humorous line about her mouth which astonished me.

"I am not offering you my hand, Mr. Greatson," she said, "because I presume that until we under-

stand each other better it would be a mere matter of form. Still, I am glad that you have come to see me."

"I am very glad too, Madame," I answered, "especially if my visit leads to a cessation of the somewhat remarkable proceedings of the last few weeks."

The Archduchess smiled.

"Well," she said, "I am forced to admit myself beaten. I have been ill-served, it is true, but I suppose my methods are antiquated."

"They belong properly," I admitted, "to a few centuries ago."

Madame smiled a little queerly.

"A few centuries ago," she said, "I fancy that if our family history is true, the affair would have been more simple."

"I can well believe it," I answered.

Madame relapsed into her chair, from which I judged that the preliminary skirmishing was over.

"You will please to be seated, Mr. Greatson!"

I obeyed.

"I am not going to play the hypocrite with you, sir," she said quietly. "It is not worth while, is it? The object of the struggle between us has been, on my part, to keep Isobel and her grandfather apart. You have doubtless correctly gauged my motive. Isobel's mother was my father's favourite child. If he had an idea that her child was alive, he would receive her without a word. She would completely usurp the place of Adelaide, my own daughter, in his affection — and in his will."

"In his will!" I repeated quietly. "Yes, I understand."

Madame nodded.

"It is quite simple," she said. "For myself I am willing to admit that I am an ambitious woman. Money for its own sake I take no heed of, but it remains always one of the great levers of the world, and it is the only lever by means of which I can gain what I desire. I never forget that the country over which my father rules was once an absolute kingdom, and semi-Royalty does not appeal to me. The betrothal of my daughter Adelaide to Ferdinand of Saxonia was of my planning entirely. The dowry required by the Council of Saxonia is so large that it could not possibly be paid if any portion of my father's fortune, great though it is, is diverted towards Isobel. Hence my desire to keep Isobel and her grandfather apart."

"Madame," I said, "you are candour itself. I can only regret that it is my hard fate to oppose such admirable plans."

"I have been given to understand," the Archduchess said, "that it is now your intention to take Isobel yourself to Illghera!"

"The tickets," I murmured, "are in my pocket."

Madame bowed.

"Well," she said, "I have seen and heard enough of you to make no further effort to thwart or even to influence you. Yet I have a proposition to make. First of all, consider these things. If we come to no arrangement with each other I shall use every means I can to prevent your obtaining an interview with my father. Everything is in my favour.

He is very old, he has a hatred of strangers, he grants audiences to no one. He never passes outside the grounds of the villa, and all the gates are guarded by sentries, who admit no one save those who have the entrée. Then, if you attempt to approach him by correspondence, his private secretary, who opens every letter, is one of my own appointing. I have exaggerated none of these things. It will be difficult for you to approach the King. You may succeed — you seem to have the knack of success — but it will take time. Isobel's re-appearance will be without dignity, and open to many remarks for various reasons. You may even fail to convince my father, and if you failed the first time there would be no second opportunity."

"What you say, Madame," I admitted, "is reasonable. I have never assumed that as yet my task is completed. I recognize fully the difficulties that are still before me."

"You have common-sense, Mr. Greatson, I am glad to see," she continued. "I am the more inclined to hope that you will accede to my proposition. Briefly, it is this! Let me have the credit of bringing Isobel to her grandfather. Her year in London would at all times, in these days of scandal, be a somewhat delicate matter to publish. What you have done, you have done, as I very well know, from no hope of or desire for reward. Efface yourself. It will be for Isobel's good. I myself shall stand sponsor for her to the world. I shall have discovered her in the convent here, and I shall take her back to her rightful place with triumph. All your difficulties then will vanish, your end will have been creditably

and adequately attained. For myself the advantage is obvious. A difference to Adelaide it must make, but it will inevitably be less if the credit of her discovery remains with me. Have I made myself clear, Mr. Greatson?"

"Perfectly," I answered. "But you forget there is Isobel herself to be considered. She is no longer a child. She has opinions and a will of her own."

"She owes too much to you," Madame replied quietly, "to disregard your wishes."

I believed from the first that the woman was in earnest, and her proposal an honest one. And yet I hesitated. The past was a little recent. She showed that she read my thoughts.

"Come," she said, "I will prove to you that I mean what I say. To-night I will give a dinner-party — informal, it is true, but the Prince of Cleves, my cousin the Cardinal, and your own ambassador, shall come. I will introduce Isobel as my niece. The affair will then be established. Do you consent?"

For one moment I hesitated. I knew very well what my answer meant. Absolute effacement, the tearing out of my life for ever of what had become the sweetest part of it. In that single moment it seemed to me that I realized with something like complete despair the barrenness of the days to come.

"Madame, if Isobel is to be persuaded," I answered, "I consent."

CHAPTER VIII

"THIS, then," the Prince remarked, raising his eyeglass, "is the young lady whose romantic history you have been recounting to me? But, my dear lady, she is charming!"

Madame held out her hands affectionately and kissed Isobel, who had entered the room with her cousin, on both cheeks. Then she took her by the hand and presented her to the Prince of Cleves and several others of the company. Isobel was a little pale, but her manner was perfectly easy and self-possessed. She was dressed, somewhat to my surprise, in the deepest mourning, and she even wore a band of black velvet around her neck.

"My dear child," her aunt said pleasantly, "I scarcely think that your toilette is a compliment to us all. White should be your colour for many years to come."

Isobel raised her eyes. Her tone was no louder than ordinary, but somehow her voice seemed to be possessed of unusually penetrating qualities.

"My dear aunt," she said, "you forget I am in mourning for my stepfather, Monsieur Feurgéres, who was very good to me."

A company of perfectly bred people accepted the remark in sympathetic silence. There was not even an eyebrow raised, but I fancy that Isobel's words,

calmly spoken and with obvious intent, struck the keynote of her future relations with her aunt.

Isobel, a few minutes later, brought her cousin over to me.

"Adelaide is very anxious to know you, Arnold!" she said quietly. This was all the introduction she offered. Immediately afterwards her aunt called Isobel away to be presented to a new arrival.

"Mr. Greatson," Adelaide said earnestly, "I cannot tell you how delighted I am that all this trouble is over, and that Isobel is coming to us. But I think — I think she is paying too great a price. I think my mother is hatefully, wickedly cruel!"

"My dear young lady," I protested, "I do not think that you must say that. Your mother's conditions are necessary. In fact, whether she made them or not, I think that they would be inevitable."

"You are not even to come to Illghera with us? Not to visit us even?"

I shook my head.

"I belong to the great family of Bohemians," I reminded her, "who have no possessions and but one dress suit. What should I do at Court?"

"What indeed!" she answered, with a little sigh, "for you are a citizen of the greater world!"

"There is no such thing," I answered. "We carry our own world with us. We make it small or large with our own hands."

"For some," she murmured, "the task then is very difficult. Where one lives in a forcing-house of conventions, and the doors are fast locked, it is very easy to be stifled, but it is hard indeed to breathe."

"Princess," I said gravely, "have you examined the windows?"

"I do not understand you," she answered.

"But it is simple, surely," I declared. "Even if you must remain in the forcing-house, it is for you to open the windows and breathe what air you will. For your thoughts at least are free, and it is of our thoughts that our lives are fashioned."

She sighed.

"Ah, Mr. Greatson," she said, "one does not talk like that at Court."

"You have a great opportunity," I answered. "Character is a flower which blossoms in all manner of places. Sometimes it comes nearest to perfection in the most unlikely spots. Prosperity and sunshine are not the best things in the world for it. Sometimes in the gloomy and desolate places its growth is the sturdiest and its flowers the sweetest."

The service of dinner had been announced. The English Ambassador took Adelaide away from me, but as she accepted his arm she looked me in the eyes with a grave but wonderfully sweet smile.

"I thank you very much, Mr. Greatson," she said. "Our little conversation has been most pleasant."

The Archduchess swept up to me. She was looking a little annoyed.

"Mr. Greatson," she said, "Isobel is pleading shyness — an absurd excuse. She insists that you take her in to dinner. I suppose she must have her own way to-night, but it is annoying."

Madame looked at me as though it were my fault that her plans were disarranged, which was a little unfair. And then Isobel, very serene, but with that

weary look about the eyes which seemed only to have increased during the evening, came quietly up and took my arm.

"If this is to be our last evening, Arnold, we will at least spend as much of it as possible together," she said gently. "I will be a very dutiful niece, aunt, to-morrow."

We moved off together, but not before I was struck with something singular in Madame's expression. She stood looking at us two as though some wholly new idea had presented itself to her. She did not follow us into the dining-room for some few moments.

The dinner itself, for an informal one, was a very brilliant function. There were eighteen of us at a large round table, which would easily have accommodated twenty-four. The Cardinal, whose scarlet robes in themselves formed a strange note of colour, sat on the Archduchess's right, touching scarcely any of the dishes which were continually presented to him, and sipping occasionally from the glass of water at his side. The other men and women were all distinguished, and their conversation, mostly carried on in French, was apt, and at times brilliant. Isobel and I perhaps, the former particularly, contributed least to the general fund. Isobel met the advances of her right-hand neighbour with the barest of monosyllables. Lady Delahaye, who sat on my left, left me for the most part discreetly alone. Yet we two spoke very little. I could see that Isobel was disposed to be hysterical, and that her outward calm was only attained by means of an unnatural effort. Yet I fancied that my being near soothed her, and

every time I spoke to her or she to me, a certain relief came into her face. All the while I was conscious of one strange thing. The Archduchess, although she had the Cardinal on one side and the Prince of Cleves on the other, was continually watching us. Her interest in their conversation was purely superficial. Her interest in us, on the contrary, was an absorbing one. I could not understand it at all.

The conclusion of dinner was marked by an absence of all ceremony. The cigarettes had already been passed round before the Archduchess rose, but those who chose to remain at the table did so. Isobel leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"Come with me into the drawing-room. I want to talk to you."

I obeyed, and the Archduchess seemed to me purposely to leave us alone. We sat in a quiet corner, and when I saw that there were tears in Isobel's eyes, I knew that my time of trial was not yet over.

"Arnold," she said quietly, "you care — whether I am happy or not? You have done so much for me — you must care!"

"You cannot doubt it, Isobel," I answered.

"I do not. This sort of life will not suit me at all. I do not trust my aunt. I am weary of strangers. Let us give it all up. Take me back to London with you. I feel as though I were going into prison."

"Dear Isobel," I said, "you must remember why we decided that it was right for you to rejoin your people."

"Oh, I know," she answered. "But even to the last Monsieur Feurgéres hesitated. My mother would never have wished me to be miserable."

I shook my head.

"I believe that Feurgéres was right," I answered. "I believe that your mother would wish to see you in your rightful place. I believe that it is your duty to claim it."

Then I think that for the first time Isobel was unfair to me, and spoke words which hurt.

"You do not wish to have me back again," she said slowly. "I have been a trouble to you, I know, and I have upset your life. You want me to go away."

I did not answer her. I could not. She leaned forward and looked into my face, and instantly her tone changed. Her soft fingers clutched mine for a moment.

"Dear Arnold," she whispered, "I am sorry! Forgive me! I will do what you think best. I did not mean to hurt you."

"I am quite sure that you did not, Isobel," I answered. "Listen! I am speaking now for Allan as well as for myself, and for Arthur too. To tear you out of our lives is the hardest thing we have ever had to do. Your coming changed everything for us. We were never so happy before. We shall never know anything like it again. If you were what we thought, a nameless and friendless child, you would be welcome back again, more welcome than I can tell you. But you have your own life to live, and it is not ours. You have your own place to fill in the world, and, forgive me, your mother's memory to vindicate.

Monsieur Feurgéres was right. For her sake you must claim the things that are yours."

"But shall I never see you again, Arnold?" she asked, with a little catch in her breath.

I set my teeth. I could see that the Archduchess was watching us.

"Our ways must lie far apart, Isobel," I said. "But who can say? Many things may happen. The Princess Isobel may visit the studios when she is in London or at Homburg. She may patronize the poor writer whose books she knows."

Isobel sat and listened to me with stony face.

"I wonder," she murmured, "why the way to one's duty lies always through Hell?"

Isobel's lips were quivering, and I dared make no effort to console her. The Archduchess came suddenly across the room to us, and bent affectionately over Isobel.

"My dear child," she said, "you are overtired. Go and talk to Adelaide. She is alone in the music-room. I have something to say to Mr. Greatson."

Isobel rose and left us at once. The Archduchess took her place. She was carrying a fan of black ostrich feathers, and she waved it languidly for some time as though in deep thought.

"Mr. Greatson," she said at length.

I turned and found her eyes fixed curiously upon me. These were moments which I remembered all my life, and every little detail in connection with them seemed flashed into my memory. The strange perfume, something like the burning of wood spice, wafted towards me by her fan, the glitter of the blue black sequins which covered her magnificent gown,

the faint smile upon her parted lips, and the meaning in her eyes — all these things made their instantaneous and ineffaceable impression. Then she leaned a little closer to me.

"Mr. Greatson," she repeated, "I know your secret!"

CHAPTER IX

I AM afraid that for the moment I lost my self-possession. I had gone through so much during the last few hours, and this woman spoke with such confidence — so quietly, and yet with such absolute conviction — that I felt the barriers which I had built about myself crumbling away. I answered her lamely, and without conviction.

"My secret! I do not know what you mean. I have no secret!"

The black feathers fluttered backwards and forwards once more. She regarded me still with the same quiet smile.

"You love my niece, Mr. Greatson," she said.

"Madame," I answered, "you are jesting!"

"Indeed I am not," she declared. "I have made a statement which is perfectly true."

"I deny it!" I exclaimed hoarsely.

"You can deny it as much as you like, if you think it worth while to perjure yourself," she replied coolly. "The truth remains. I have had a good deal of experience in such matters. You love Isobel, and I am not at all sure that Isobel does not love you."

"Madame," I protested, "such statements are absurd. I am no longer a young man. I am thirty-four years old. I have no longer any thought of marriage. Isobel is no more than a child. I was

nearly her present age when she was born. The whole idea, as I trust you will see, is ridiculous."

The Archduchess regarded me still with unchanged face.

"Your protestations, Mr. Greatson," she said, "amuse, but utterly fail to convince me."

"Let us drop the subject, then," I said hastily. "At least, if you persist in your hallucination, I hope you will believe this. I have never spoken a word of what could be called love-making to the child in my life."

"I believe you implicitly," she answered promptly. "I believe that I know and can appreciate your position. Let me tell you that I honour you for it."

"Madame," I murmured, "you are very good. Let us now abandon the subject."

"By no means," she answered. "On the contrary, I should like to discuss it with you fully."

"Madame!" I exclaimed.

"Let us suppose for a moment," she went on calmly, "that I am correct, that you really love Isobel, but that your peculiar position has imposed upon your sense of honour the necessity for silence. Well, your guardianship of her may now be considered to have ended. From to-night it has passed into my hands. Still, you would say the difference between your positions is immeasurable. You are, I doubt not, a gentleman by birth, but Isobel comes from one of the ancient and noble families of the world, and might almost expect to share a throne with the man whom she elects to marry. It is true, in effect, Mr. Greatson, that you are of different worlds."

"Madame," I answered, "why do you trouble to demonstrate such obvious facts? They are incontestable. But supposing for a moment that your surmises concerning myself were true, you will understand that they are painful for me to listen to."

"You must have patience, Mr. Greatson," she said quietly. "At present I am feeling my way through my thoughts. There is rash blood in Isobel's veins, and I should like her life to be happier than her mother's. She is unconventional and a lover of freedom. The etiquette of our Court at Illghera will chafe her continually. I wonder, Mr. Greatson, if she would not be happier — married to some one of humbler birth, perhaps, but who can give her the sort of life she desires."

I was for a moment dumb with astonishment. Apart from the amazement of the whole thing, the Archduchess was not in the least the sort of person to be seriously interested in the abstract question of Isobel's happiness. At least, I should not have supposed her capable of it. I imagine that she must have read my thoughts, for after a searching glance at me she continued:

"You doubt my disinterestedness, Mr. Greatson. Perhaps you are right. I wish the child well, but there is also this fact to be considered. Isobel married to an English gentleman such as, say, yourself, would be no longer a serious rival to my daughter in the affections of her grandfather."

Then indeed I began to understand. What a woman of resource! She watched me closely behind the feathers of her fan.

"Come," she said, "this time my plot is an in-

nocent one, and it is for Isobel's happiness as well as for my daughter's benefit. Speak to her now. Marry her at once, here in Paris, and I will give her for dowry twenty thousand pounds!"

I ground my heel into the carpet, and I was grateful for those long black feathers which waved gracefully in front of my face. For I was tempted — sorely tempted. The woman's words rang like mad music in my brain. Speak to her! Why not? It was the great joy of the world which waited for me to pluck it. Why not? I was not an old man, the child was fond of me, a single word of compliance, and I might step into my kingdom. Oh, the rapture of it, the wonderful joy of taking her hands in mine, of dropping once and for ever the mask from my face, the gag from my tongue! A rush of wild thoughts turned me dizzy. My secret was no longer a secret at all. The Archduchess leaned a little closer to me, and whispered behind those fluttering feathers —

"You are a very wonderful person, Mr. Greatson, that you have kept silence so long. The necessity for it has passed. The child loves you. I am sure of it."

But my moment of weakness was over. I had a sudden vision of Feurgéres, standing on the stage, listening with bowed head to the thunder of applause, but with his eyes turned always to the darkened box, with its lonely bouquet of pink roses — lonely to all save him, who alone saw the hand which held them — of Feurgéres in his sanctuary, bending lovingly over that chair, empty to all save him, Feurgéres, with that smile of unearthly happiness upon his lips — calm, debonair and steadfast. This was the man who had trusted me. I raised my head.

"Madame," I said quietly, "what you suggest is impossible."

She stared at me in incredulous astonishment.

"But I do not understand," she exclaimed weakly. "You agree, surely?"

I shook my head.

"On the contrary, Madame," I said, "I beg that you will not allude further to the matter."

The Archduchess muttered something in German to herself which I did not understand. Perhaps it was just as well.

"You will vouchsafe me," she begged, speaking very slowly, and keeping her eyes fixed on me, "some reason for your refusal?"

"I will give you two," I answered. "First, it is contrary to the spirit of my promise to Monsieur Feurgéres."

Her lip curled.

"Well?"

"Secondly," I continued, "I should be taking a dishonourable advantage of my position with regard to Isobel. She is very grateful to me, and she would very likely mistake her sentiments if I were to speak to her as you suggest. She is too young to know what love is. She has met no young men of her own rank, she does not understand in the least what sort of position is in store for her."

"These are your reasons, then?"

"I venture to think that they are sufficient ones, Madame," I answered.

The Archduchess rose.

"We shall need a new Cervantes," she remarked, "to do justice to the Englishman of to-day. I shall

keep my word, Mr. Greatson, as regards Isobel, and I can promise you this. If gaiety and eligible suitors, and the luxury of her new life are not sufficient to stifle any sentimental follies she may be nursing just now, I will not rest till I find other means. Adelaide's future is arranged. I will set myself to make Isobel's equally brilliant. I will make her the beauty of Europe. She shall forget in a month the squalid days of her life with you and your friends in an attic."

"So long as Isobel is happy," I answered, "my mission is accomplished, and I am content."

"You are a fool and a liar!" she answered contemptuously. "You will love her all your days, and you know it. You will grow to curse the memory of this hour in which you threw away the only chance you will ever have of winning her. The only chance, mind, I will answer for that. I wish you good-evening, Mr. Greatson. You are excused. Isobel, as you are aware, remains here. You will find her in the music-room with Adelaide. Go and make your adieux, and make them quickly. You will be interrupted in three minutes."

She swept away from me with only the slightest inclination of her head. I made my way to the music-room, where Isobel and her cousin were sitting together. Directly I entered, the latter, with a little nod of curious meaning to me, rose and left us alone. I held out my hands.

"Isobel, dear," I said, "this must be — our farewell, then — for a time!"

She placed her hands in mine. They were as cold as ice. Her cheeks were white, her eyes seemed

fastened upon mine. All the while her bosom was heaving convulsively, but she said nothing.

"I can only wish you what Arthur and Allan have already wished you," I said, "happiness! You have every chance of it, dear. You surely deserve it, for you brightened up our dull lives so that we can, no one of us, ever forget you. Think of us sometimes. Good-bye!"

I stooped and kissed her lightly on the cheek. But suddenly her arms were wound around my neck. With a strength which was amazing she held me to her.

"Arnold!" she sobbed. "Oh, Arnold!"

Her lips were upon mine, and in another second I should have been lost, for my arms would have been around her. The door opened and closed. We heard the jingling of sequins, the sweep of a silken train. The Archduchess had entered. Isobel's arms fell from my neck, but her cheeks were scarlet, and her eyes like stars.

"You — are going?" she pleaded.

"I am going," I answered huskily.

The Archduchess came down the room, humming a light tune.

"So the dread farewell is over, then!" she exclaimed, with light good humour. "Come, child, no red eyes. Remember, a Waldenburg weeps only twice in her life. Once more, good-night, Mr. Greatson."

I had reached the door. Isobel was standing still with outstretched arms. The Archduchess glided between us — and I went.

. . . . . .

The next morning I travelled unseen by the Riviera

express, to which the saloon of the Archduchess had been attached, all the way to Illghera. I saw her driven with the others to the villa.

Two days afterwards, from a hill overlooking the grounds, I saw an old gentleman in a pony chaise preceded by two footmen in dark green livery. Adelaide walked on one side, and Isobel on the other. That night I left Illghera for England.

CHAPTER X

I KNEW the moment I opened the door that changes were on foot. Our studio sitting-room was dismantled of many of its treasures. Allan, with his coat off and a pipe in his mouth, was throwing odds and ends in a promiscuous sort of way into a huge trunk which stood open upon the floor. Arthur, a few yards off, was rolling a cigarette.

Our meeting was not wholly free from embarrassment. I think that for the first time in our lives there was a cloud between Allan and myself. He stood up and faced me squarely.

"Arnold," he said, "where is Isobel?"

"In Illghera with her grandfather," I answered. "Where else should she be?"

"Are you sure?"

"I have seen her there with my own eyes," I affirmed.

There was a moment's pause. I saw the two exchange glances. Then Allan held out his hand.

"That damned woman again!" he exclaimed. "Forgive me, Arnold!"

"Willingly," I answered, "when I know what for."

"Suspecting you. Lady Delahaye wrote Arthur a note, in which she said that the Archduchess and

you had made fresh plans. You can guess what they were. And Illghera was off. You did hurry us away from Paris a bit, you know, and I was fool enough to imagine for a moment that there might be something in it. Forgive me, Arnold!" he added, holding out his hand.

"And me!" Arthur exclaimed, extending his.

I held out a hand to each. There was something grimly humorous in this reception, after all that I had suffered during the last few days. My first impulse of anger died away almost as quickly as it had been conceived.

"My friends," I said, "the Archduchess did propose some such scheme to me, but you forget that my honour was involved, not only to you, not only to the child, but to a dead man. I can look you both in the face and assure you that in word and letter I have been faithful to my trust."

"I knew it!" Allan declared gruffly. "Dear old chap, forgive me!"

"I am the brute who dangled the letter before his eyes," Arthur exclaimed bitterly, "and I am the only one of the three who has broken our covenant."

"My dear friends," I said slowly, "the things which are past, let us forget. Isobel has gone back to the life which claimed her. No barrier which human hand could rear could separate her from us so effectually and irrevocably as the mere fact that she has taken up the position which belongs to her. She is the Princess Isobel of Waldenburg, a king's grandchild. And we are — what we are! Let me now make my confession to you. I, too, loved her."

The two hands which held mine tightened for a moment their grasp. The old "camaradie" was established once more.

"It is I who was responsible for her coming," I continued. "It is only fitting that I, too, should suffer. How she grew into our hearts you all know. She has gone, and nothing can ever be the same. Yet I for one do not regret it. I regret nothing! I am content to live with the memory of these wonderful days she spent with us."

"And I!" Allan declared.

"And I!" Arthur echoed.

I wrung their hands, for it was a joy to me to feel that we had come once more into complete accord.

"You know what sort of a state we were drifting into when she came," I continued. "We were like thousands of others. We were rubbing shoulders, hour by hour and day by day, with the world which takes no account of beautiful things. She came and laid the magician's hand upon our lives. We had perforce to alter our ways, to alter our surroundings, our amusements, our ideals. Joy came with her, and pain may find a secret place in our hearts now that she has gone, but I do not think that either of us would willingly blot out from his life these last two years. Would you, Arthur?"

"Not I!" he declared. "We had to learn ourselves to teach her. To chuck the things that were rotten, anyhow, just because she was around. Jolly good for us, too!"

"I agree with Arthur and you," Allan said. "I agree with all that you have said. The child was dear to me too. So dear, that I do not think that it

would be easy to go back to our old life without her. That is why ——"

He glanced around the room. Our hands fell apart. I lit a cigarette and looked at the open trunk.

"You are going away, Allan?"

He nodded.

"I'm off to Canada," he said. "I've an old uncle there who's worth looking after, and he's always bothering me to pay him a visit. Right time of the year, too — and hang it all, Arnold, I've sat here for a week in front of an empty canvas, and I'd go to hell sooner than stand it any longer!"

"And you, Arthur?"

"I have been appointed manager of our Paris Depôt," Arthur answered a little grandiloquently. "I could n't refuse it. Much better pay and more fun, and all that sort of thing, and — oh, hang it all, Arnold, is it likely a fellow could stay here now she's gone?" he wound up, with a little catch in his throat.

So the old days were over! I looked at my desk, and by the side of it was the chair in which she used sometimes to sit while I read to her. Then I think that I, too, was glad that this change was to come.

"There is one thing, Arnold," Mabane said quietly, "about her things. We locked the door of her room. Mrs. Burdett has packed up most of her clothes, but there are the ornaments and a few little things of her own. We should like to go in — Arthur and I. We have waited for you."

"We will go now," I answered. "She will have no need of anything that she has left behind. We will each choose a keepsake, and lock the rest up."

We entered the room all together, almost on tip-

toe. If we had been wearing hats I am sure that we should have taken them off. How, with such trifling means at her command, she could have left behind in that tiny chamber so potent an impression of daintiness and comfort I cannot tell. But there it was. Her little bed, with its spotless counterpane, was hung with pink muslin. There was a lace spread upon her toilet-table, on which her little oddments of silver made a brave show. Only one thing seemed out of place, a worn little slipper peeping out from under a chair. I thrust it into my pocket. The others took some trifle from the table. Then, as silently as we had entered, we left the room. As I turned the key I choked down something in my throat, and did my best to laugh — a little unnaturally, I am afraid.

"Come!" I cried, "it is I who am responsible for this attack of sentiment. I will show you how to get rid of it. You dine with me at Hautboy's. I have money — lots of it. Feurgéres left me twenty thousand pounds. Hautboy's and a magnum of the best. How long will you fellows be dressing?"

They tried to fall into my mood. Allan mixed cocktails. We drank and smoked and shouted to one another uproariously from our rooms as we changed our clothes. We drove to Hautboy's three in a hansom, and Arthur spent his usual five minutes chaffing the young lady behind the tiny bar. But when the wine came, and our glasses were filled, a sudden silence fell upon us. We looked at each other, and we all knew what was in the minds of all of us. It was Allan who spoke.

"To Isobel!" he said softly.

We drank in silence, each busy with his own

thoughts. But afterwards Arthur raised his glass high above his head.

"To the Princess Isobel!" he cried. "Long life and good luck to her!"

Afterwards there were no more toasts.

. . . . . .

Arthur and Allan went their several ways within twenty-four hours of our farewell dinner. I saw them both off, and I forced them with great difficulty to share to some small extent in Feurgéres' legacy. Then I took some rooms near my club in the heart of London, and line for line, word for word, I re-wrote the whole of the story which I had not dared to show to Isobel, determined that the one thing I still had which was part of her body and soul should be the best that my brain and skill could fashion. So the winter and the early spring passed, and then my story was published.

CHAPTER XI

A MIRACLE of white daintiness, from the spotless muslin of her gown to the creamy lace which hung from her parasol. So far as toilette went, Lady Delahaye was always an artist. Yet my pulses were unmoved, and my heart unstirred, as she stood under my dark cedar-tree and welcomed me with all the expression which her tone and eyes could command.

"So you see, Sir Hermit," she murmured, "what happens to those who will not go to the mountain? Seriously, I hope you are glad to see me."

"Why not?" I answered calmly. "Will you come inside, or shall we sit here in the shade?"

"Here, by all means," she answered, subsiding gracefully into a wicker chair.

"You will let me order you some tea?"

She checked my movement towards the house.

"For Heaven's sake, no! I have been paying calls all the afternoon with Mrs. Jerningham, and you know what that means. She has gone to the Hall now, and I am to pick her up in half an hour."

"You are staying at Eastford House, then?" I remarked.

"For a few days. Can you guess why?"

"The house parties there have the reputation of being amusing," I suggested.

She shook her head.

"It was not that. Can you make no better guess?"

"I am a dunce at riddles," I admitted.

"You are a dunce at many things," she replied. "The reason I came was because I knew that you were living in these parts, and I had a fancy to see you again."

"You are very good," I remarked.

She looked at me critically.

"You have not changed," she said slowly. "One would almost say that the life of a recluse agrees with you. You have by no means the white and wasted look which I expected. Is it fame which you have found so potent a tonic?"

I laughed lightly.

"Don't call it fame," I answered. "Success, if you will. My profession is so much of a lottery. A whiff of public opinion, a criticism which hits the popular fancy, and the bubble is floated. I'm not pretending that I don't appreciate it, but it was a stroke of luck all the same."

She was silent for a few moments. From outside we could hear the jingling of harness as Mrs. Jerningham's fat bays resented the onslaught of officious flies. Nearer at hand there was only the lazy humming of bees to break the stillness of the summer afternoon. Lady Delahaye sighed.

"You are talking nonsense, and you know it," she said. "I do not want to flatter you. Any man who has the trick of the pen, and chooses to give himself wholly and utterly away, can write a powerful story."

"I am afraid that I do not understand you," I protested.

"Yes, you do. You cut open your own heart, and you offered the world a magnifying glass to study its wounds. You wrote your own story. You told the tale of your own suffering. Of course it was strong, of course it rang with all the truth of genius. So you loved that child, Arnold! You, a man of the world, not a callow schoolboy. You loved her magnificently. Did she know?"

"She did not know," I answered. "She never will know."

"She may read the book!"

"She may read it, and yet not know," I answered.

"It is true," she murmured. "Unless she loved herself she might not understand."

Again we were silent for a while. The perfume of the cedars floated upon the hot breathless air. Lady Delahaye half closed her eyes and leaned back.

"You read the newspapers, Sir Hermit?"

"Sometimes."

"You have heard the news from Waldenburg?"

"I read of the King's death."

"And of the betrothal of the Princess Isobel?"

"Yes. I have read also of that."

"The cousins will both be the consorts of reigning sovereigns, small though their kingdoms may be. One reads great things of Adelaide. Her people call her already 'the well-beloved.'"

A swift rush of thought carried me back to the dark stormy crossing, when the rain had beaten in our faces, and the wind came booming down the Channel. Adelaide stood once more by my side. I

heard the quiet, bitter words, the low, passionate cry of her troubled heart. "The well-beloved" of her people! After all, race tells.

"I spoke but twice alone to the Princess Adelaide," I said. "I learnt enough of her, however, to be sure that in any position she would do the thing that was right and gracious."

"And so will Isobel," Lady Delahaye said. "I know the race well. The men are degenerates, but the women have nerve to rule and courage to hold their own against the world. Isobel's future may well be the more brilliant of the two. Can you realize, I wonder, that Isobel of Waldenburg was once the child who filled your brain with such strange fancies?"

"I never think," I answered, "of Isobel of Waldenburg."

"You are wise," she answered. "She is as surely separated from us eternally as though she had made that little journey from which one does not return. Yet you — you are going to hug your wounds all your life. Is that wise, my friend?"

I laughed softly.

"You are mistaken," I assured her. "I have no wounds — not even regrets. I believe that there are few men happier. Look at my home!"

"It is beautiful," she admitted.

"My gardens, my flowers, my cedar-tree and my books," I said. "These are all a joy to me. What more can a man want? Friends have moods, and they pass away out of one's life. The friends who smile from my study wall are patient and always ready. There is one to fit every hour. They do not

change. They are always ready to show me the way into the world beautiful, to cheer me when I am sad, to laugh with me when I am gay. You must not waste any sympathy on me, Lady Delahaye. The man who has learnt to live alone is the man who has learnt the greatest lesson life has to teach. He is the man for whom the sun shines always, who carries with him for ever the magic key."

Lady Delahaye disturbed the smoothness of my turf with the point of her parasol.

"Are there no times," she asked in a low tone, "when these things fail you? No times when like calls for like, when the human part of you finds the comfort of ashes a dead thing? You and your books and your flowers!" she cried scornfully, raising her head and looking at me with heightened colour. "Bah! You are a man, are you not, like the others? How long will these content you? How long will you stop your ears and forget that life has passions and joys which these dead things can never yield to you?"

"Until," I answered, "the magician comes who can make me believe it. And I am afraid, Lady Delahaye, that he has passed me by."

She rose to her feet.

"I am answered," she said. "I promise you that I will not intrude again into this Paradise of wood and stone. Give me a cigarette to keep off these flies, and take me down to the carriage. Thanks! If one might venture upon a prophecy, my dear Arnold, I think that I can see your fate very clearly written. I do not even need your hand to read it."

"Would the spell," I asked, "be broken if I shared the knowledge?"

"Not in the least," she answered, with a hard little laugh. "You will become one of those half-mad sort of creatures whom people call cranks, or you will marry your housekeeper. In either case you will deserve your fate."

So Lady Delahaye drove away down the white dusty road, and I walked back to the study from whence her coming had brought me. As I sat down to my interrupted work I smiled. How little she understood!

I wrote till seven o'clock. Punctually at that hour there was a discreet knock at the door, and my servant reminded me that it was time to change. At a quarter before eight I strolled into the garden and selected a piece of heliotrope for the buttonhole of my dinner coat. A few minutes later my dinner was served.

My table was a small round one set in front of the open French windows. Looking a little to the right I could see the extent of my domain — a low laurel hedge, a sloping field beyond, in which my two Alderneys were standing almost knee-deep amongst the buttercups; a ring fence, a paddock, and, beyond, the road. To the left were my gardens, the sweetness of which came stealing through the window with the very faintest breath of the slowly moving air, bordered by that ancient red brick wall, mellowed and crumbling with the sun and west winds of generations, and in front of me my lawn and the cedar-tree under which Lady Delahaye had sat an hour or so ago and prophesied evil things. My lips

parted into a smile as I thought of her words. Did she indeed think me a creature so weak as to pile gloom on the top of sorrow, to shut my eyes to all the joys of life, because supreme happiness was denied me, to play skittles with my self-respect, and — marry a kitchen-maid? I, who had turned over great pages in the book of life! I, who had known Feurgéres! Wallace had left the room for a moment, and I raised my glass full of clear amber wine, and drank silently my evening toast. I drank to the memory of the greatest love I had ever known, to the man whose strong and beautiful life had taught me how to fashion my own. Perhaps my thoughts flashed a little further afield. It was so always when I thought of Feurgéres, but it was to the joyous and wonderful memory of those earlier days, to Isobel the child I drank. Isobel of Waldenburg had passed away into the world of shadows. I courted no heartaches by vain thoughts of her. I pored over no papers to find mention of her name. I was content with what had gone before.

I morbid! Lady Delahaye had judged me wrongly indeed. I, before whom two great worlds stretched themselves continually, full of countless treasures, always changing, yet always beautiful. Only yesterday I had seen the sun rise. I had seen the still slumbering world break into quivering life. I had seen the curtain roll up on a new act of this most wonderful of all plays to the music of an orchestra hidden indeed in my grove of chestnuts, but sweeter, more joyous, more full of the promise of perfect things than ever a violin touched by human fingers. Then the thrushes had hopped out on to my dew-

spangled lawn, where before the hot sun the grey, gossamer-like mist was vanishing like breath from a mirror; my roses raised their heads, and the breeze from the west — a lazy, fluttering breeze — borrowed their sweetness; my peaches cracked through their full skins upon the wall, and the bees commenced their eternal lullaby of murmuring sounds. Then at night — such a night as this, too, promised to be — I had watched the shadows come creeping over the land when the sun had set and the moon had barely risen; a new order of things had come. The fire of the day was replaced by the infinite peace of night. Beyond the confines of my little domain the whole world lay hushed and hidden. There were few stars as yet to mock with their passionless serenity the toilers of the earth, worn out with the long day's struggle. Only a great quiet — a great, peaceful quiet — and the shadows of dim things!

I morbid, with eyes to see these things, with a whole room full of waiting friends, ready at a touch of my fingers, the turning of a page, to take me by the hand and lead into even other worlds as beautiful as this, to scale with me the mountains, or to wander along the flower-strewn valleys. Lady Delahaye was a very foolish woman. She had seen nothing of my well-ordered household, of the ease, the luxury — simple, yet almost Sybaritic — with which I had surrounded myself. She did not understand life from my point of view — life as Feurgéres had lived it. The life sentimental, but not passionate; the life to be evolved by will from the tangle of bruised hopes and hot desires. The life ——

I set down my glass empty. The last drop had

tasted like vinegar. Always one has to fight, and for a while I sat in silence before my table piled now with dishes of fruit. My hands gripped the sides of my chair, my eyes were fixed upon a twinkling light which had shot out from the distant hillside. Always one has to fight for the things worth having — and the pain soon passes.

In a few minutes I rose. I lit a cigarette from the box which Wallace had placed at my elbow, and with a handful more in my pocket I stepped outside. On the lawn under the cedar-tree something was lying — something pink and fluffy, and very soft to the fingers. As I held it at arm's length a faint, familiar perfume stole up from its flouncy depths. The pain was all gone now. I smiled as I looked at it. It was Lady Delahaye's parasol!

I turned it over meditatively. The fancy seized me that it had been left there on purpose — my last chance! Eastford House was barely a mile and a half away — a very reasonable after-dinner stroll. I smiled to myself as I summoned Wallace from the dining-room.

"Take this parasol over to Eastford House as soon as you have served my coffee," I directed. "Lady Delahaye must have left it here this afternoon."

"Very good, sir," Wallace answered, relieving me of my burden and carrying it into the house.

Then I departed on my usual evening pilgrimage. I entered the flower garden by a little iron gate, and walked slowly amongst my roses. Here the air was full of delicate scents — lavender insistent; mignonette faint, but penetrating; homely wall-flowers,

sweet even as the roses themselves. Night insects now were buzzing around me; the bushes took to themselves phantasmal shapes; even the path, very narrow and overgrown, was hard to find. I filled my hand with flowers and made my way slowly back to the cedar-tree. The shadows were deeper now. It was the one hour of darkness before the rising of the late moon. I threw myself into a low chair, and the flowers on to the seat which encircled the cedar-tree. Oh, wonderful Feurgéres, who had taught me the sweetness of such moments as this!

Always she came the same way; yet to-night it seemed to me that a startling note of reality heralded her coming. The ghostliness of her movements, that noiseless flitting across the lawn were changed. Almost I could have sworn that the little iron gate had indeed been opened and closed, that real footsteps had fallen lightly enough, but, with actual sound, upon the gravel path, that I could hear the soft swish of a real dress from the slim white figure which came hesitatingly across the lawn. Oh, Feurgéres was a great man! It was a great thing which he had taught me. My pulses were thrilled with expectant joy. Reality itself could be no more real. But to-night — to-night was a triumph indeed! She was dressed differently. She wore a long white travelling cloak, a veil pushed back from her hat. I did not understand. My fancy had never dressed her like this. That little cry, her pause. Had I indeed done greater things than Feurgéres, and summoned to my side real flesh and blood?

"Arnold!"

I gripped the sides of my chair. I felt my breath

coming shorter. A cry. I could not keep it back from my quivering lips.

"Isobel!"

I could not move. I was afraid of what I had done. And then she dropped on her knees by my side, and real arms were about my neck, real kisses were upon my lips. Then I no longer had any fear, for from whatever world she had come the joy of it was like a foretaste of heaven. I drew her to me, held her passionately, and I knew that this was no creature of my mind's fashioning, but a live woman, whose heart beat so wildly against my own. . . .

"It was all Adelaide," she murmured presently. "She brought me your book, and afterwards we talked. She was alone with my grandfather — and then he sent for me. I was afraid, for this was in his last days. Shall I tell you what he said, Arnold?"

"Yes," I answered, tightening my grasp upon her. "Go on talking!" For I was fighting still for belief.

"He took my hand quite calmly, and I knew at once that I had nothing to fear. 'Isobel,' he said, 'they tell me that you have your mother's blood in your veins, that freedom means more to you than ambition, that you are a woman first and a Waldenburg afterwards. Is this true?' Then I told him everything, and he kissed me. 'Go your own way, Isobel,' he said, 'but stay with me while I live. Adelaide has shown me many things which I did not understand. Poor child!' He sent for his lawyers, Arnold, and he made me a poor woman. I am

much too poor to be a princess any longer — unless I may be yours."

Then I believed — this, the strangest of all things that may happen to a man. My garden of fancies, which Feurgéres had shown me so well how to cultivate, passed away into the mists. Before the moon rose, Paradise was there.

THE END

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